



JUMP!

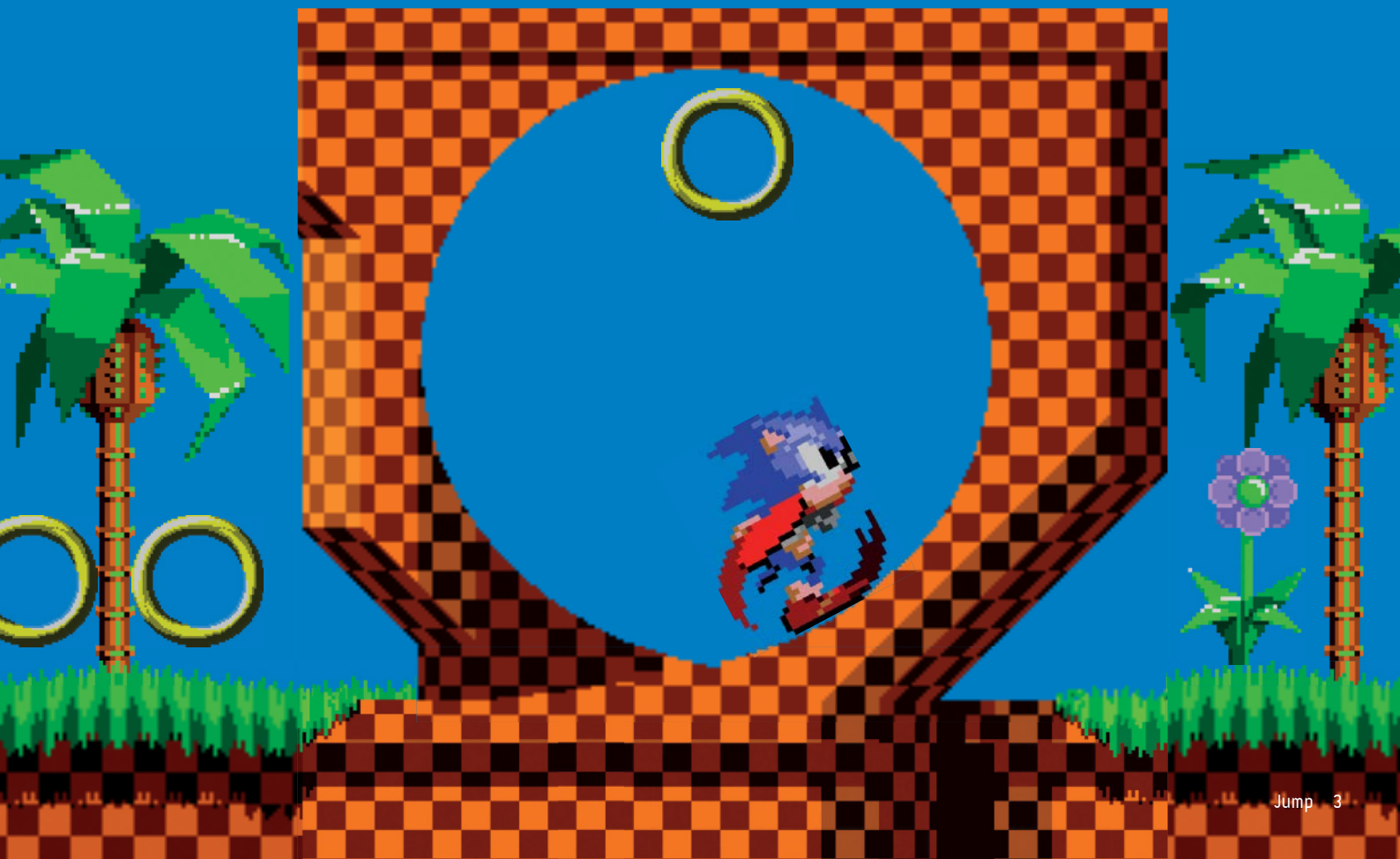
FROM MARIO TO MIRROR'S EDGE
THE ULTIMATE PLATFORMERS GUIDE

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THE ULTIMATE PLATFORMERS GUIDE

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CHUCKIE EGG

Platform games have traditionally been vehicles with which to launch marketable videogame icons. Mario, Sonic and countless others found fame in the genre before moving onto other things. So why didn't Hen House Harry achieve bigger things?

CONVERSION CAPERS

Despite the original Spectrum *Chuckie Egg* concept being designed by Nigel Alderton, the many different 8-bit versions were actually coded by different members of the A&F team including co-founder Doug Anderson who developed the BBC Micro version. Interestingly, this led to each version of the game having slightly different physics models that affected the way the game played. Some versions, like the Amstrad CPC and BBC Micro edition had realistic physics while others, such as the Spectrum version were more unrealistic. Each different version was as well loved as the last though, except for the Amiga version which was abysmal.

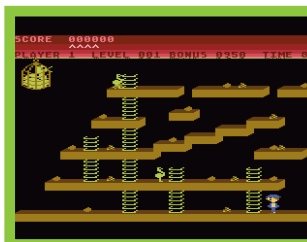


▲ The Amiga version of *Chuckie Egg* was completely different to the 8-bit editions.

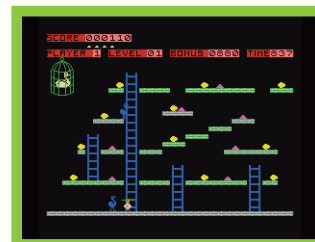
Release: 1983
Format: 8-bit Home Computers
Publisher: A&F Software
Developer: Nigel Alderton

It wasn't the first. *Donkey Kong* and *Pitfall* beat it to the punch. But if those games were the premiere genre entries for Japan and the US respectively then *Chuckie Egg* is the UK equivalent. Okay, so *Manic Miner* was released in the same year but let's be honest, it wasn't as good. *Chuckie Egg* could have been an arcade game. The controls were loose yet reliable, the graphics were bold, if a little basic, and the level design was perfect.

Charged with collecting all the eggs from his chicken coop, Hen House Harry had to climb ladders, jump gaps and dive into elevators all in the name of egg hunting, while avoiding the oversized hens that roamed the house like angry ostriches. It may have looked relatively simple in still screens but *Chuckie Egg* was and still is a complex and demanding platformer. From the third level onwards, the game asked the player to perform all kinds of tricky manoeuvres. Timing jumps to land on the moving elevators was one of the toughest moves to pull off, while learning how to second-



▲ The Atari XL incarnation in action.



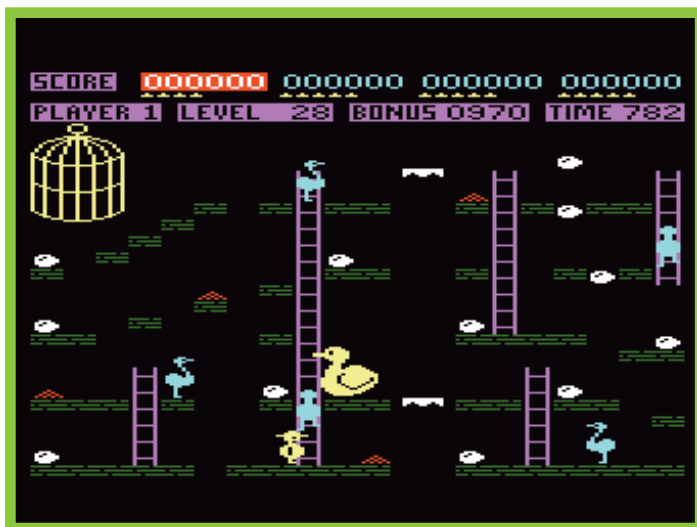
▲ The little-known MSX version of *Chuckie Egg*.

guess the roaming birds – that could inexplicably climb ladders – became essential to progress. More advanced players would later learn the best spots to jump from ladders as well as master Harry's ability to bounce off platforms if he hit them at the desired angle.

Yes, it was much deeper than it looked, especially in the scoring system. Harry could earn extra points and, eventually, lives by collecting the bird feed scattered around the level. The catch was, however, that the birds often ate the feed if they got to it first. Therefore, the smartest players would hunt out the vulnerable bird feed before heading for anything else, in order to maximise their score and earn plenty of extra lives.

Those who managed to overcome the trickiness and thwart all eight levels were in for a big surprise.

Like most arcade-style games of the period, the game 'looped', once finished, for all the levels to be played over until all lives were lost. Unusually, though, the levels had a small but significant change that shocked those who saw it for the first time, and totally changed the way the game played. The abnormally large duck that had silently watched over the game from the top left-hand corner of the screen suddenly liberated itself from the cage and took flight around the level, chasing Hen House Harry with the relentlessness of a poultry Terminator. Unhindered by platforms or any other obstacles, the unnamed duck would roughly circle Harry, making direct and deadly dives toward him at regular intervals. Contending with the giant duck was bad enough but Harry still had to collect the eggs, dodge the blue hens



▲ Things get pretty hectic once the giant duck breaks loose.

“CHUCKIE EGG FELT LIKE IT COULD HAVE BEEN AN ARCADE GAME”

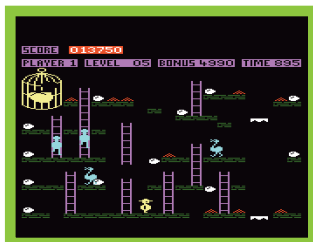
and avoid plummeting to the bottom of the level – all enough to ensure that players were kept well and truly on their toes until all remaining lives were lost.

You may be forgiven for thinking that *Chuckie Egg* wasn't all that special initially. *Crash* magazine awarded the game 80% but failed to mention the 'duck twist' from Level 9 – presumably because they didn't reach it – this resulted in a review that largely missed the point. Still, British gamers soon discovered the greatness of *Chuckie Egg* for themselves, and word of mouth propelled the game to over 1 million sales nationwide. Considering the piracy that was rampant at the time, this was a huge achievement and should have cemented Hen House Harry as a bona fide star. So why didn't it happen? There are several reasons, not least the fact that

publisher A&F Software failed to capitalise on the licence.

A sequel was produced in 1985 but was a messy videogame that lacked the charm and playability of the original, which perhaps put gamers off as they moved onto better platformers. A&F Software eventually went bust in the late-Eighties having failed to break into the booming console market or even crack the 16-bit computer scene. The Amiga conversion of *Chuckie Egg*, meanwhile, replaced Harry with a walking egg-man, which made little sense and ruined any chance of building him into a recognisable and marketable character.

It's a shame as the quality of the original game meant that Hen House Harry should have lived on throughout the Eighties to star in even more games. Now we can only wonder what might have been.



OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF 1983



ON THE RADIO

“Buying bread from a man in Brussels, he was six foot four and full of muscles, I said, do you speak-a my language? He just smiled and gave me a Vegemite sandwich.” The greatest lyrics of any song ever made? Bands of the world might as well have stopped playing music after 1983. Men At Work had clearly perfected the art form with *Down Under*.



AT THE MOVIES

1983 was the year that the *Star Wars* saga seemingly came to an end. And while millions of people flocked to cinemas to see Luke Skywalker take on the Empire for the final time and liberate his father, there were some who weren't a hundred per cent pleased, mostly because of the annoying Ewoks. Just wait until they saw Jar Jar.



ON THE TELEVISION

Does children's TV get any better than *Fraggle Rock*? The Jim Henson-produced puppet show about a bunch of strange cave-dwelling creatures was completely bonkers but essential viewing. Despite its silliness, however, there were serious messages behind the way different races (Fraggles, Doozers, Gorgs and so on) co-existed and interacted. Social parables and amusing songs... what more could you want from a bunch of muppets?



▲ How those birds climb ladders without arms we'll never know.



BEHIND THE SCENES

PLOK

Five years in the making and a personal favourite of Shigeru Miyamoto, Plok should have been a smash hit. If only it hadn't come along at the same time as a million other cute-looking platform games



■ Ste Pickford claims he didn't worry about what people thought as he conceived *Plok*. If he had, he wouldn't have created these terrifying mouth-faced beasts.



+ +



Released: 1993

Format: SNES

Publisher: Tradewest

Developer: Software Creations

KEY STAFF:

John Pickford

(Producer, Game Designer)

Ste Pickford

(Art Director, Game Designer)

John Buckley

(Programmer)

Lyndon Brooke

(Graphic Artist)

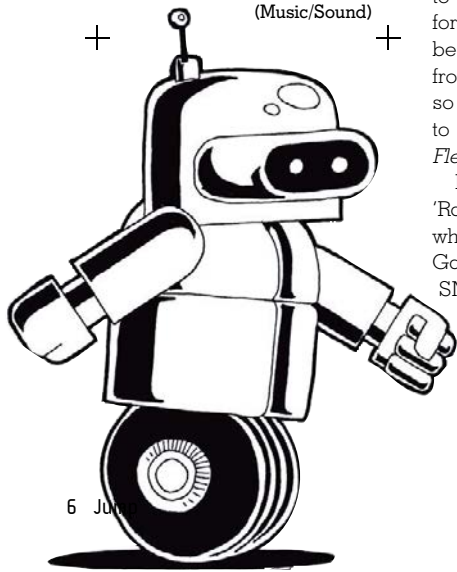
Tim Follin

(Music/Sound)

Geoff Follin

(Music/Sound)

+ +



“ALMOST ALL OF” our original games start out with either a specific game mechanic, or a feeling that we want to inspire in the player,” says Ste Pickford, one half of the Pickford brothers, creators of *Feud*, *Wetrix*, *Solar Jetman*, *Naked War* and many other British classics. And for the brothers’ most famous SNES platform game, *Plok*, the feeling they presumably wanted to inspire was the sensation of being legless. Literally.

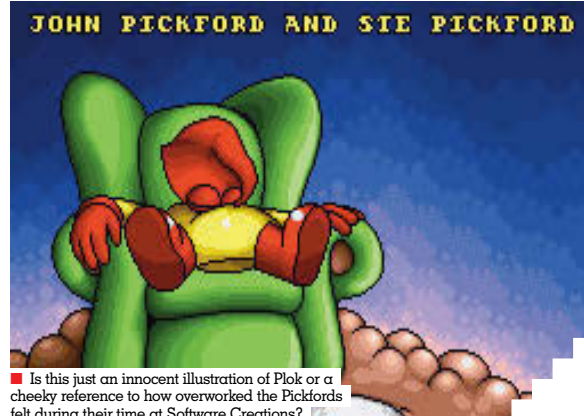
“It wasn’t the character exactly that we started with,” explains Ste, “but the action of throwing the arms, or the feeling of this action for the player. The character of Plok came from the idea of literally throwing punches, then everything else built up around that idea, step by step.” Quite where this mad concept came from, however, the brothers cannot say. “That was the magic bit of inspiration that started it all. I’ve no idea where original ideas like that come from. They just pop into your head I guess.”

After starting out with such a strong core concept, the Pickfords could have simply built a bunch of fun levels around their new character, released the game and moved on to their next project, and you’d be forgiven for believing that. However, as with many behind-the-scenes stories, the transition from sketchbook to screen didn’t quite run so smoothly. In fact, it took an incredible five years to reach completion. The reason: *Plok*’s first game, *Fleapit*, was never actually finished.

Designed for Rare’s custom arcade hardware, the ‘Razz Board’, *Fleapit* was developed by the Pickfords while they were still a part of the now-defunct Zippo Games. “It wasn’t a million miles away from the SNES game, perhaps a bit more primitive in some ways, and I think it had more set pieces or one-off levels. It was a coin-op so it was a bit harder, and you died a lot. We had daft things like footballs flying on the screen and you had to **CONTINUED >**.”

I’VE NO IDEA WHERE ORIGINAL IDEAS COME FROM. THEY JUST POP INTO YOUR HEAD





■ Is this just an innocent illustration of Plok or a cheeky reference to how overworked the Pickfords felt during their time at Software Creations?

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
JAY

▲ Two things spring to mind when I think of *Plok*. First, *NMS* (or was it *Mean Machines*?) gave it a fairly average score and later admitted it was basically wrong. And second, it's hard. Bloody hard.

Posted by:
RYAN WHITELAW

▲ I remember *Superplay* giving it 91 per cent, which was unheard of from them. It was a great game. I always loved throwing my hands around and turning into all kinds of vehicles.

Posted by:
THEVULTURE

▲ I did have the game. Cart only. It had fantastic Tim Follin music. I paid rather more than I'd have liked for it, but I so needed to hear that music. Follin always produced stunning music from the hardware he worked on.

Posted by:
EVERNALCYMRU

▲ I remember this as the best game of its time that involved purposeful self-amputeism! That's no mean feat.

Posted by:
TEPID SNAKE

▲ The game has a weird, goofy charm like the *James Pond* titles. And while it drags on for a bit, it's good fun. I'll always remember it for what happened when I actually bought it. It was in a second-hand game shop somewhere in Exmouth, and as the old man behind the counter looked at the games I'd selected, he focused his attention on *Plok*, with a wry smile on his face, he said to me, straight-laced, "Y'know, kid, back when this was out, I went on holiday to America, and they had this as the in-flight entertainment." Without missing a beat, he finished by saying, "It was the worst flight of my life."



■ The aim of the game is to recover Plok's missing flag. At the end of each level, he raises a flag – Mario style – to find it's not the right one.

automatically converting SNES games to the Mega Drive. It mostly worked, but needed a fair amount of hand coding for whichever sections of code didn't translate automatically very well, due to the technical differences between the platforms. He had an 80% working version of *Plok* up and running very quickly and then spent ages getting it to 85% or 90% working, but for one reason or another it never made it to 100% working, and therefore never came out."

■■■ RETURNING TO CONCEPT, the Plok character, and game, Ste found that his previous *Fleapit* illustrations needed to be redone to accommodate the shift from 8-bit arcade to 16-bit console. "Colour reproduction wasn't available in the Eighties, but monochrome photocopying was, so I tended to just draw in black-and-white as that was photocopyable. Most of my design thoughts were about shape and line, rather than colour and tone, and I felt far more comfortable designing with a black pen in my hand than an array of colours." When it was time to translate the black-and-white designs into colour sprites, Ste, unbelievably, picked colours at random, "but when you only had 8 or 32 colours to choose from, this wasn't such a bad approach".

"What we did on *Fleapit*," Ste continues, "was to come up with a pre-defined colour scheme in advance for the whole game, which helped a lot. I'd noticed that because videogame artists have RGB [red, green, blue] sliders in the colour pickers within art packages, we tended to make our colour schemes around RGB, or variations of that scheme, which isn't a very natural look. We went back to the artist's colour wheel and started looking through the Pantone tables and worked out a more natural and balanced-looking colour scheme



WHAT THEY SAID...



"Plok weaves a good game. Once you look under the covers, you'll find an engaging, thumb-numbing adventure. If you like hop-n-bop action, pin down Plok"

GamePro, September 1993

■■■ score a goal in the middle of a platform level, rather like *ExciteBots*. We had horizontal and vertical levels. I don't remember it that well as I haven't played it again since."

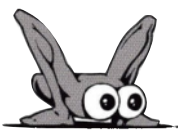
Cancelled in 1990 at half-complete status, *Fleapit* fell victim to the realities of independent publishing. "It was self-funded, and John and I stupidly wanted to make a coin-op game because we'd grown up loving coin-ops and we'd always been in awe of them. Rare's hardware presented us with an opportunity to fulfil this ambition. It wasn't a smart business decision, though. The NES was available to us and was massive, and there was lots of 16-bit work around, too, all of which we could get paid for and potentially make royalties on. The coin-op deal on offer was simply access to their hardware. No funding at all. We had to pay to make the game ourselves, finish it, debug it, test it, and we'd retain ownership and a fat cut of the board sales to arcades. We were mad to do that instead of console work, but we were just in love with the idea of making a coin-op. Then we ran out of money, Rare took us over, John and I left soon after, and that was the end of the project. We still had the character, though, and lots of game mechanic ideas, so we resurrected that a few years later at Software Creations."

Ste and John joined Software Creations in 1990 and were soon promoted to art director and producer respectively. The pair pitched a new *Plok* game to studio head Richard Kay, and though NES, SNES and Game Boy releases were proposed, only the SNES version was formally agreed. "There was almost a Mega Drive version too," reveals Pickford. "A guy at Software Creations came up with a clever system for

WE WERE IN LOVE WITH THE IDEA OF MAKING A COIN-OP... THEN WE RAN OUT OF MONEY



■ Plok discovers a statue of his grandfather, whose levels appear towards the end of the game in flashback form.





for the game – with yellows and oranges as prominent as blues and reds, and worked out the RGB values for these colours. This meant the game’s colour scheme was kind of bunched up in different areas of the standard RGB gamut, rather than being evenly spread like in most videogames, but it looked really nice. This was for *Fleapit*. By the time we were working on *Plok* I couldn’t get away with not having a decent sense of colour any more.” And as you’ll see from the remaining concept art, the *Plok* era illustrations had a much greater defined sense of the colour palette.

■ ■ ■ WITH A LONG history of making console games for both Nintendo and Rare, the Pickfords approached the design of *Plok* with the all-important mantra inherited from their peers – create every part of the game with the end user’s experience in mind. “Rare taught us the massively important and obvious lesson that the game has to be enjoyable for the player. Previously, we’d made games that were technically impressive or did something that no other game did, graphically or technically, or in terms of memory use or load speed.

A lot of our energy was directed towards doing clever things with the target platform, and showing off to other developers, essentially. We often forgot about whether the game was actually fun for the player. Rare understood this very well, and really got the idea into our head that it’s the audience’s experience that matters, not just how clever your system is. They showed us a lot of the early Nintendo NES stuff – including *Super Mario Bros* and *Zelda* – which was laughably primitive technically and graphically at the time by comparison with what we were doing. Our first instinct was to dismiss these games as rubbish, but Rare made us play them, and made us realise that these games were brilliant, and the technically amazing, graphically amazing 16-bit games we were making and playing at the time were actually garbage, in gameplay terms, compared to these simple looking NES games. This was a real eye-opener. We’d been doing games all wrong. Since then, we’ve been much more focused on the player’s experience, whether or not the game is fun and easy to understand rather than making things that were technically impressive.”

Playing *Plok* today, it’s easy to see how this focus on fun paid off. The central limb-flinging mechanic gives the game a uniquely amusing flavour while

■ *Plok*’s illustrations used a much more vivid and mature selection of colours than *Fleapit*, due to the advanced colour palette available.



also introducing an element of risk and strategy in the way it limits the number of attacks you can make as you wait for the limbs to return. Other features, like the costumes that transform Plok and grant him temporary new abilities, also keep the novelty factor high, the game working hard to keep the player amused throughout. No wonder it earned so many positive reviews when it was first released.

Achieving such a high standard wasn’t a case of simply drawing on previous experience. “Each game is about two years’ worth of ideas, two years’ worth of trial-and-error, banging and shaping and knocking ideas into place,”

says Ste. And those two years were not without difficulty, especially as *Plok* was the first game for which the Pickfords had to take a back seat, handing over their design for someone else to program and put together.

“All the difficulties from our point of view were to do with the differences between what we **CONTINUED >**



STE PICKFORD
Art Director

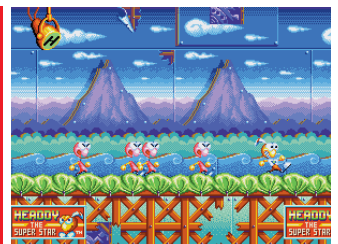
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



Plok evolved from *Fleapit*, an abandoned game designed for Rare’s arcade board. We’d definitely buy a Super Ravioli Bros game.



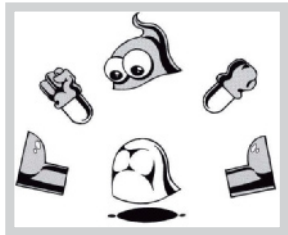
Other characters who also liked throwing bits of themselves around soon appeared, including Dynamite Headdy.





■ Miyamoto's *Yoshi's Island* came out two years after *Plok*. "It was an incredible game, but definitely had one or two little ideas from *Plok* in there. We took that as a compliment," says Ste Pickford.

Target Market



■ FOR A FAMILY game, you really have to question the design of *Plok*. Not only do his limbs detach one by one, but he also seems to be wearing an executioner's hood. Surely this guy isn't suitable for young children? "We don't really think in those terms now, so we definitely didn't back then," says Ste Pickford, stifling a laugh. "I think if you're constantly worried about how certain people might view the end product, you'll never be able to develop your initial ideas. You'd be cutting them down all the time. We tend to follow the path dictated by the initial idea and see where it takes us, rather than trying to make a product aimed at a particular market, and judge success along the way based on whether we'd enjoy playing the game if it was like this or like that. We're game designers, not marketing men."

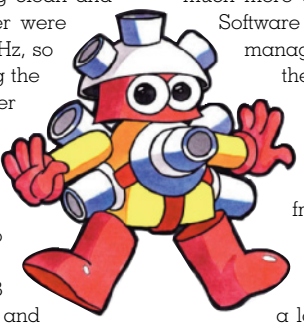
■ wanted and what the team actually did," Ste explains. "That isn't to criticise lead programmer John Buckley and lead artist Lyndon Brooke, who were bloody brilliant and probably the best two guys available in the studio. My brother and I were new to project management, and I don't think we were particularly good at it. We were new to working through other people to implement our designs. At the same time, John and Lyndon were imaginative and creative guys themselves, full of good ideas and with the energy and enthusiasm to implement them. Lyndon was very good at the technical side of the graphics so did a lot of clever things with data and level design. John Buckley was a very disciplined programmer, who took great pride in his code being clean and bug free, and both he and my brother were adamant that the game would run at 60Hz, so a lot of technical effort went into making the game run cleanly and smoothly, rather than clever technical trickery.

The problem was that their ideas weren't our ideas, and we often clashed with each other. One issue we had was that the game was too hard, and that was something we had arguments about, with JB and LB remaining firm that it was right, and JP and I wanting it easier. One compromise we came up with was to take the first eight levels and completely redo them. The existing first eight levels were shoved further into the game, turned black-and-white, and made into Grandpappy Plok's flashback levels. Then we rebuilt a new first eight, which created a much

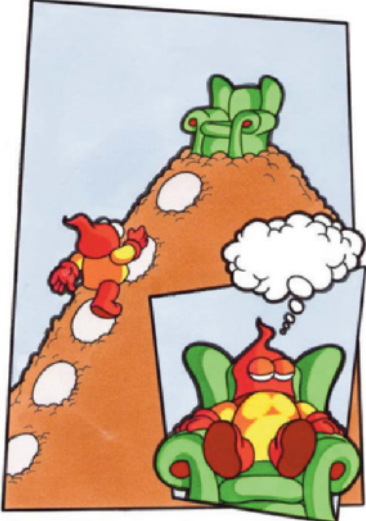
WE'VE NEVER HAD THE KIND OF BACKING THAT'S ALLOWED US A SHOT AT SUCCESS

gentler introduction to the game. They were probably still a bit too hard, but this was a big improvement, and something that happened relatively late on in the game's development."

■ THOUGH THE PICKFORD brothers clearly had some worries about *Plok*, others obviously had much more confidence in the project, particularly Software Creations' management, which almost managed to convince Nintendo to publish the game, complete with guidance from Shigeru Miyamoto. "They seemed to like it a lot, but then nothing happened, and it went with Tradewest instead," laments Ste. "We only learned later from Rick [Richard Kay] the story of what happened. As we were told, it was reviewed favourably in Seattle then sent to Nintendo in Japan to have a look at. Supposedly they quite liked it.



Miyamoto reviewed the game and apparently drew a little chart showing in the number-one position *Super Mario World*, in the number-two position *Sonic The Hedgehog*, and in the number-three position *Plok*. He said he would work with us on the game, and the new chart would look like this: one would still be Mario,



■ With the era's upsurge in "cute looking" platform characters, poor old *Plok* was left to fade into obscurity.





number two would be *Plok*, and number three would be *Sonic*. With his help he'd make it the second best platformer in the world. But, as I say, we only heard this story later on, after the game was signed up with Tradewest. I've no idea why Nintendo chose not to go with *Plok*. It's a shame as it would have been great to work with the big man and we should surely have had a big hit if it was published by Nintendo."

■■■ PLOK NEVER DID become the second-best platform game ever made, but it was never generally recognised as the third best either due to arriving at a bad time in the 16-bit era, getting lost in a crowd of *Sonic The Hedgehog* clones and generic platform also-rans. "*Plok* was something we'd had in our heads for years as *Fleapit* when we finally managed to convince Creations to take on the project, so this was something we'd been working on since the late-Eighties, that we could finally make happen," explains Ste. "If *Plok* had come out closer to when we'd conceived of it, it would have felt reasonably fresh. All the other cute character platforms games were much later ideas, but, for one reason or another, got to market faster than us. Things like *Bubsy The Bobcat* all started appearing as we were past halfway through *Plok*. Then, as we were putting the finishing touches to the game, we'd read reviews saying things like 'not another cute character platform game'. It was just bad timing."

The legacy of *Plok* is consequently defined by 'what ifs' and 'if onlys'. If the game had been released earlier, and if it had benefited from Nintendo's support, then it might have sold better, and the Pickfords, who retained the rights to the character, could have made a sequel or two. Instead, other characters with similar attributes, like Treasure's *Dynamite Headdy* and Ubisoft's *Rayman*, achieved mass popularity while poor *Plok* faded into obscurity.

"I think *Plok* was easily good enough to warrant a similar level of success," reflects Ste, "and we had the ideas and the talent to make the game

■ One of the most amusing features in *Plok*: hit a switch and you sacrifice a limb to the coat hanger, leaving you at a slight disadvantage. Hit the switch four times and you'll be left with just a torso.



into a franchise or a series of games, but a jobbing developer such as Software Creations, swapping publishers with every project, just couldn't make a franchise like that happen. I don't begrudge *Rayman* any success at all, but I do regret that we've never had the kind of backing that's allowed us a shot at similar success ourselves".

Still, *Plok* does have its small but loyal army of fans, and at the front of their ranks, if the internet is to be believed, is Shigeru Miyamoto, who is reported to regard the SNES game as one of his favourite games of all time. "We probably started that rumour ourselves," admits Ste Pickford, glibly.



CHIPPER TUNES

A different set of brothers were behind the music of *Plok*

■ THE BEST PART of *Plok*, some would argue, can be experienced before you've even picked up the controller. The music on the title screen, seemingly played by *Plok* himself on a harmonica, is one of the most impressive chiptunes to come out of the SNES and is matched in quality by the rest of the game's soundtrack. But with legendary Commodore 64 composer Tim Follin involved, who could be surprised? "Tim was brilliant," remembers Ste.

"He was good fun to work with, but he worked at his own pace. There was a lot of prodding involved, a lot of waiting and sweating, but it was always worth it in the end. On all the games where Tim did the music, it was actually Tim and his brother Geoff we were working with. They worked together as a team, and to be honest, Geoff did most of the work. He probably did something like 75% of all the music and sound effects. He'd

be the one we'd sit and chat with about the audio every day. He'd be the one who actually came into work every day and sat working on his computer every day. Tim was a bit more... elusive. But, when he did deliver, his work was magical and inspired. He was the genius, without a doubt, and everyone's favourite bits are probably Tim's pieces."



THE **RETRO** GUIDE TO... **MICKEY MOUSE**

As one of the most recognisable characters, he's appeared in a few videogames as well. **games™** revisits the best and worst of Mickey's digital adventures



THE RETRO GUIDE TO... MICKEY MOUSE

MICKEY MOUSE IS arguably one of the most iconic characters of all time. Created by Walt Disney, he made his cartoon debut in 1928's *Steamboat Willie*, becoming a huge star in the process. He helped build Disney into one of the entertainment industry's biggest empires

and has been continually reinvented to stay current to generation after generation of children. Unsurprisingly, the mouse has appeared in plenty of videogames, but what might surprise you is the diversity of his digital outings. Join us then as we revisit his back catalogue that stretches back over 30 years.

"MICKEY MOUSE IS ARGUABLY ONE OF THE MOST ICONIC CHARACTERS OF ALL TIME"



SORCERER'S APPRENTICE 1983

PLATFORMS: ATARI 2600

Mickey's first outing on a home system is this entertaining effort. Based on the famous sketch from Fantasia, it consists of two main areas. The Mountains sees Mickey catching stars and shooting fireballs to create empty buckets. Alternatively he can move to the cavern where he must stop broomsticks from filling the area with water. If the water level rises too high on either screen the game is over.



MICKEY'S SPACE ADVENTURE 1986

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

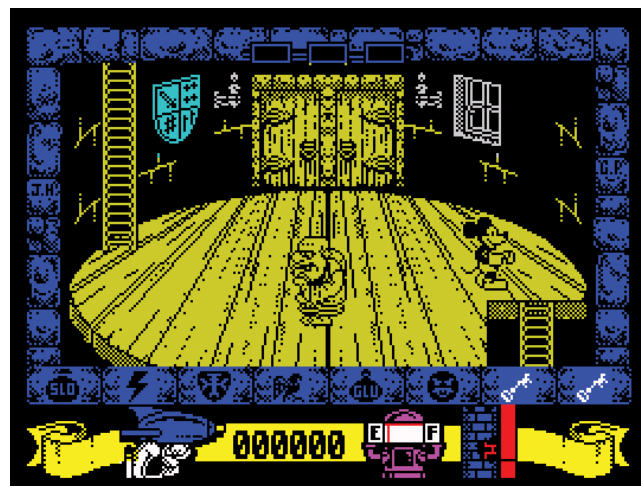
Before he became famous for his lewd Leisure Suit Larry series, Al Low created a number of adventure games for Sierra Entertainment. One of his earliest is this enjoyable graphic adventure that has Mickey head off to explore Earth's solar system in an attempt to retrieve a precious crystal. It's pretty straightforward, with words being chosen rather than typed in, but the story is pleasant enough and it's all held together by bright cartoony visuals.



MICKEY MOUSECAPADE 1987

PLATFORMS: NES

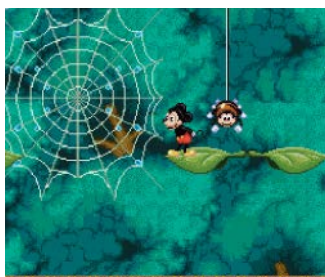
As well as having an awesome name, *Mickey Mousecapade* is notable for being the first of many Mickey Mouse games published by Capcom. The game itself is by Hudson Soft, who cheekily nicked sprites from its other games and threw them against the hapless mouse and his best gal Minnie. Minnie is an interesting addition, following Mickey around and doubling his fire power when relevant power-ups appear, but also getting occasionally caught on random objects. The game itself is a fairly basic platformer that's made more interesting by the number of differences between the Japanese and American versions (a trait of many other Mickey Mouse games). While the Japanese version focuses on *Alice In Wonderland*, the Western version features a variety of Disney films, including *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* and *The Jungle Book*.



MICKEY MOUSE 1988

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

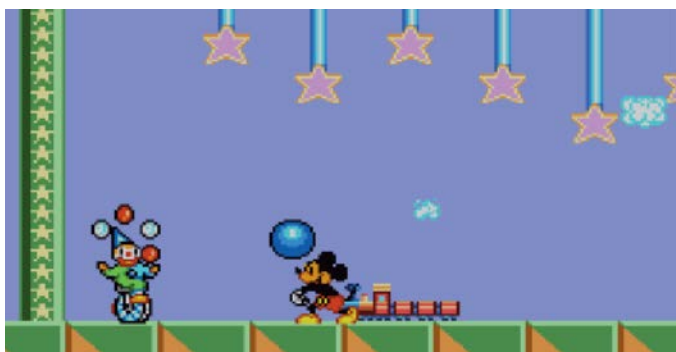
Although Capcom had the Mickey Mouse licences sewn up for consoles, the home-computer market was fair game to anyone that wanted to have a crack at the iconic mouse. The earliest official game is this effort from Gremlin Graphics that's memorable for its cover that depicts Mickey waggling a Kempston Joystick. The game itself is okay, and has Mickey climbing towers in an attempt to recover Merlin's wand. Armed only with a water pistol and a rubber mallet, Mickey must squirt and wallop his way to victory, alternating between weapons, depending on what enemies he's facing.



CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 1990

PLATFORMS: MEGA DRIVE

For many gamers, this remains the best Mickey Mouse game. It has everything you'd want for a triple-A release – amazing aesthetics, tightly crafted gameplay and superb level design. The castle is full of variety, while a large selection of bosses keeps you on your toes and urges you through every world. If there's one complaint we have, it's that the game is perhaps a little too easy for its own good, allowing even average players to see all its secrets in a relatively short space of time.



CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 1990

PLATFORMS: MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR

We'll say this very quietly in case we wake the internet, but this is actually better than Sega's Mega Drive game. While it's aesthetically inferior, Sega worked its magic and delivered a platformer that made the most of the Master System's capabilities. The gameplay is more challenging, with tougher bosses and generally harder levels.

MICKEY'S 123: THE BIG SURPRISE PARTY 1990

PLATFORMS: AMIGA, DOS

Mickey isn't just an entertainer to children; he's an educator as well. *Mickey's 123* is the first of many games aimed at younger children to teach them rudimentary skills, in this case numbers. Pressing different numbered keys lets Mickey buy burgers, make toys and visit numerous locations as he prepares Minnie's birthday party.



AND THE REST...

All the other official games and expansions released

■ **MICKEY MOUSE**
YEAR: 1981, SYSTEM: GAME & WATCH

■ **MICKEY & DONALD**
YEAR: 1982, SYSTEM: GAME & WATCH

■ **MICKEY MOUSE 2**
YEAR: 1984, SYSTEM: GAME & WATCH

■ **MICKEY'S CROSSWORD PUZZLE MAKER**
YEAR: 1991, SYSTEM: APPLE II, DOS

■ **MICKEY'S RUNAWAY ZOO**
YEAR: 1991, SYSTEM: AMIGA, DOS

■ **FOLLOW THE READER**
YEAR: 1993, SYSTEM: DOS

■ **MICKEY MOUSE: MAGIC WANDS!**
YEAR: 1993, SYSTEM: GAME BOY

■ **MICKEY'S SAFARI IN LETTERLAND**
YEAR: 1993, SYSTEM: NES

■ **MICKEY'S ADVENTURES IN NUMBERLAND**
YEAR: 1994, SYSTEM: NES

■ **DISNEY'S MAGICAL QUEST 2**
YEAR: 1994, SYSTEM: VARIOUS

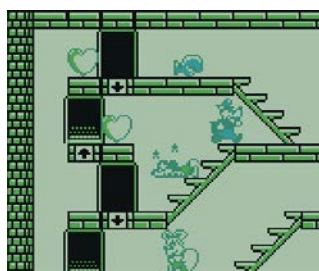
■ **LEGEND OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE**
YEAR: 1995, SYSTEM: GAME GEAR, MASTER SYSTEM

■ **MICKEY'S RACING ADVENTURE**
YEAR: 1999, SYSTEM: GAME BOY COLOR

■ **MAGICAL TETRIS CHALLENGE**
YEAR: 1999, SYSTEM: VARIOUS

■ **DISNEY'S MICKEY MOUSE TODDLER**
YEAR: 2000, SYSTEM: WINDOWS

■ **DISNEY'S MICKEY SAVES THE DAY: 3D ADVENTURE**
YEAR: 2001, SYSTEM: WINDOWS



MICKEY MOUSE 1991

PLATFORMS: GAME BOY

If this game looks familiar, it's probably because you've come to know it as *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle*. Kemco unfortunately didn't have the Mickey Mouse license outside of Japan. To counteract this, Kemco chose instead to stick various other licensed characters in its overseas iterations of the game. Mickey Mouse is a quirky puzzle platformer with Mickey rushing and running around the stages, squashing bad guys and collecting hearts. There really isn't a lot to this game, with its simple dynamics and basic graphics, but it is perfectly well suited for the Game Boy thanks to its handy password system.

MICKEY'S JIGSAW PUZZLES 1991

PLATFORMS: AMIGA, DOS

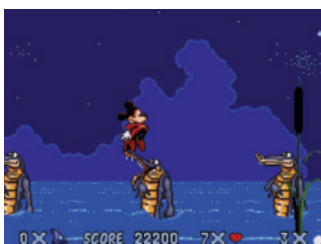
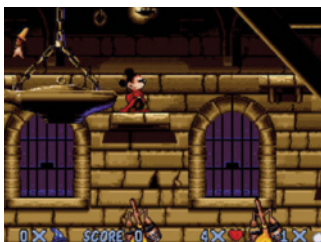
Everyone likes jigsaws, right? So a jigsaw game starring Mickey Mouse is a no-brainer. It's actually nowhere near as boring as it sounds, thanks to the large number of puzzles to choose from and the option of breaking them into a maximum of 64 pieces, which delivers a stiff challenge. This is a diverting little time-waster that's worth whiling away an hour or four.



FANTASIA 1991

PLATFORMS: MEGA DRIVE

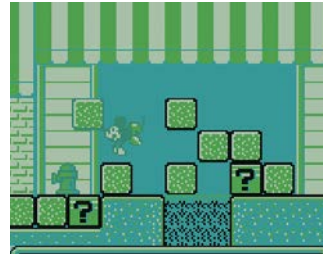
Playing *Fantasia* is about as pleasant an experience as rolling around naked in a field of hedgehogs. Everything that made *Castle Of Illusion* such a joy is missing from Sega's farmed-out sequel. While it is still visually outstanding, the collision detection has all the grace and finesse of a hippo on skates, while the delightful orchestrated soundtrack of the original film has been butchered so badly that you'll more-than happily perforate your eardrums with carrots in order to never have to hear it again. This is, without a doubt, Mickey's darkest hour.



MICKEY'S COLORS & SHAPES 1991

PLATFORMS: DOS

This education game teaches colours and shapes to youngsters. It's very basic, even for an education title, with the player helping Mickey perform tricks by pointing out the correct shapes and colours. It's again marred by hefty loading times and is as shallow as a puddle.



MICKEY'S CHASE 1991

PLATFORMS: GAME BOY

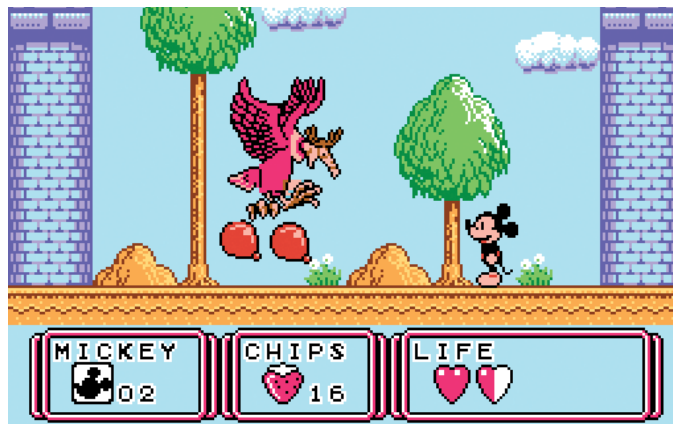
Production's Game Boy platformer is a more traditional affair, ripping off *Super Mario Bros.* Mickey or Minnie can leap around, picking up and chucking blocks at enemies. It's a fun game in short doses, but lacks the refinement and polished controls of the game it's trying so hard to imitate.



MICKEY MOUSE II 1991

PLATFORMS: GAME BOY

Kemco's handheld sequel is a hugely dramatic improvement over the original, featuring levels that are much better designed, chunkier sprites and more game mechanics that range from using hammers to smash boulders to escaping up handy pipes. It's known in the West as *The Bugs Bunny Crazy Castle 2* or *Hugo*, depending on where you live.



THE KINGDOM HEARTS CONNECTION

The Square/Disney crossover that somehow manages to please everyone

Although Mickey doesn't actually star in them, it would be churlish to not include a brief look at the *Kingdom Hearts* series. First released in 2002, it immediately drew the attention of gamers thanks to the top-tier tagging of both Disney and *Final Fantasy*.

A slavish fan product that was also married to a great game, the original adventure saw hero Sora teaming up with Donald Duck and Goofy in an attempt to free Mickey. He's briefly playable in *Kingdom Hearts 2*, but for the most part he's just there for support or to continue driving the story forward.

The series has been a huge success for Square Enix, shifting over 20-million copies across seven games. Fans continue to hope that Mickey will be fully playable in the upcoming *Kingdom Hearts 3*, but we feel that's unlikely. It doesn't stop us wishing, mind.



MICKEY MOUSE III: YUME FUUSEN 1992

PLATFORMS: NES

Kemco's third game was exclusive to NES and moved away from the formulae of previous titles. Mickey can fling balloons at enemies, jump on them to gain more height or even use them to float around the stage. Interesting mechanics aside, it's a rock-hard platformer that's the wrong side of frustrating. Those from the West will know it as *Kid Klown In Night Mayor World*. What do you mean? You've never heard of it?

MICKEY'S ABC'S: A DAY AT THE FAIR 1992

PLATFORMS: AMIGA, DOS

Like *Mickey's 123, ABC* is by Distinctive Software and aimed at two to five-year-olds. It boasts the same animated sprites and colourful locations, but centres around teaching children the alphabet. Kids can press a button to trigger a sequence or get Mickey to do things by selecting a letter.



WORLD OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE & DONALD DUCK 1992

PLATFORMS: MEGA DRIVE

Who would have thought that the addition of Donald Duck would create one of Mickey's best games? Mickey's hard-to-understand friend helps turn *World Of Illusion* into a fantastic multiplayer affair, with many of the stages built around the two buddies helping each other out. It works exceptionally well, delivering one of the best co-op games on the console. It's just as playable on your own as either Mickey or Donald, but really shines with a friend. Its only downside is that like *Castle Of Illusion*, it's a little too easy.



LAND OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE

1992

PLATFORMS: MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR

Sega's *Illusion* sequel is certainly worth tracking down, as it builds nicely on the mechanics found in *Castle Of Illusion*. In addition to picking up items, Mickey also earns several powers as the game progresses. There are more environmental hazards, while the new map screen allows for a sense of progression. Be warned though, like its *Castle Of Illusion* counterpart it's an equally tough cookie to crack.



DISNEY'S MAGICAL QUEST 1992

PLATFORMS: SNES, GBA

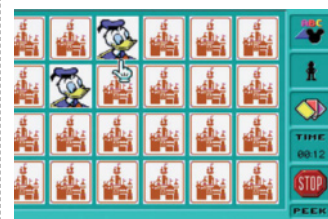
Like *Castle Of Illusion*, it's a little simple, but has far more challenging bosses and detailed visuals. A GBA update was released, adding a range of mini-games and introduced Minnie Mouse as a playable character.



MICKEY'S MEMORY CHALLENGE 1993

PLATFORMS: DOS

Another extremely basic children's game courtesy of Infogrames. Most children will happily match the pictures of famous Disney characters, but you can mix things up by combining pictures with the relevant words.



MICKEY MOUSE: TEAM PLAYER

Although it's only natural that a mouse as talented as Mickey gets his own games, he's not afraid to share the limelight with others. Sadly, while Mickey loves being a team player, he struggles to pick decent games to appear in. Take the range of sports games by Konami for example. They're all woefully bad. *Disney Sports Soccer, Motocross, Skateboarding, Football, Basketball, Snowboarding* are terrible games that deserve nothing more than a collective mention. In fact, the only sports game he's appeared in that's any cop is *Disney Golf* on PS2, but even that's not a patch on similar games. Mickey also headed the cast of Chinese online-racer *Disney Magicboard Online*. Sadly, it appears to have been shut down.



MICKEY MOUSE IV: THE MAGICAL LABYRINTH 1993

PLATFORMS: GAME BOY

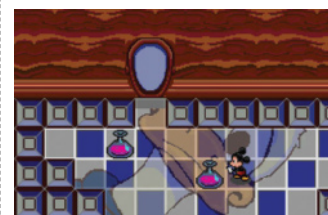
Known as *The Real Ghostbusters* stateside and *Garfield Labyrinth* in Europe, this is easily one of the most puzzle-orientated *Crazy Castle* games. While Mickey's pneumatic drill adds a welcome new game mechanic, the overall level design is rather weak.



MICKEY'S ULTIMATE CHALLENGE 1994

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

Ultimate Challenge will be of interest as it's an early effort by Wayforward Technologies and is the last game released for the Sega Master System. *Ultimate Challenge* is an otherwise dull adventure that has Mickey and Minnie performing puzzles in an attempt to save the citizens of Beanswick.



MICKEY MANIA 1994

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

There are lots of facts about *Mickey Mania*. David Jaffe made his debut here as a stage designer, it's the first Mickey Mouse game to feature actual Disney animators, and each level is based around a classic cartoon. It's bone-crushingly difficult in places, with 'god, I want to die' difficulty spikes.



MICKEY NO TOKYO DISNEYLAND DAIBOKEN 1994

PLATFORMS: SNES

No wonder this never made it outside of Japan. It's terrible. The graphics are smart, but the controls are horribly clunky and imprecise, making it a nightmare to navigate the enemy-filled locations. Sorry Minnie, you'll have to stay kidnapped.

DISNEY'S MAGICAL QUEST 3 1995

PLATFORMS: SNES, GBA

The last *Magical Quest* game sees Mickey team up with Donald Duck. It introduces new suits, another motley selection of bosses and some great visuals. It's slightly tougher than the previous two games, but never frustratingly so. The GBA version featured a link-up mode as well.



MICKEY'S SPEEDWAY USA 2000

**PLATFORMS: N64,
GAME BOY COLOR**

It was only a matter of time before Mickey jumped into a kart and tried to outdo Mario. It's a fine effort, with slick handling, but then you'd expect no less from Rare. The track design isn't quite as good as other N64 kart racers, but it remains a hoot in multiplayer.



DISNEY'S MAGICAL MIRROR STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 2002

PLATFORMS: GAMECUBE

Based on the 1936 cartoon *Thru The Mirror*, *Magical Mirror*, aimed at younger kids, is a tediously mundane point-and-click adventure that's about as much fun as hitting yourself in the face with a frozen packet of grill steaks.



DISNEY'S HIDE AND SNEAK 2003

PLATFORMS: GAMECUBE

There's a reason why it took Disney seven years to create a new Mickey Mouse game. That reason is *Hide And Sneak*. As the name suggests there's a big emphasis on sneaking, but Capcom has also thrown a number of puzzles into the mix, making it an odd bastardisation of *Magical Mirror*, and we know how that turned out... An odd mish-mash of genres that even youngsters will be bored of.



EPIC MICKEY 2010

PLATFORMS: WII

There were high hopes for *Epic Mickey*. Legendary games designer Warren Spector and his studio Junction Point Studios was at the helm, its concept art looked suitably weird and it boasted some interesting paint mechanics. Then *Epic Mickey* came out and everything fell apart. Spector appeared to be stuck in the late-Nineties, delivering a bland platformer.



EPIC MICKEY 2: THE POWER OF TWO 2012

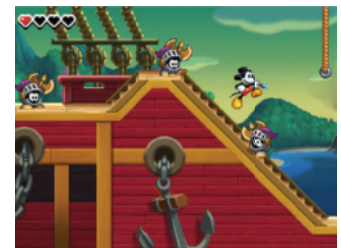
PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

Spector's second attempt failed to improve on his first. The addition of Oswald as a secondary character is a nice touch, but it fails to fix the problems that plagued the original. Despite appearing on a myriad of systems, it sold a fraction that the original did.

EPIC MICKEY: POWER OF ILLUSION 2012

PLATFORMS: 3DS

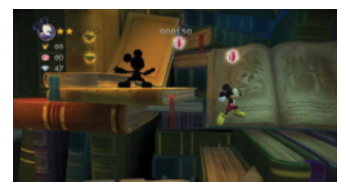
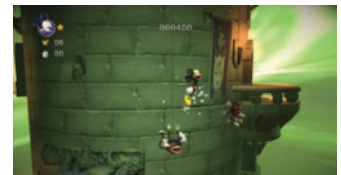
Released alongside *Epic Mickey 2*, *Power Of Illusion* appeared to channel the classic *Mega Drive* game. Appearances are deceiving, however, and it's actually a bland romp through classic Disney films, with Mickey using the paintbrush skills he picked up in *Epic Mickey*.



CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE 2013

PLATFORMS: VARIOUS

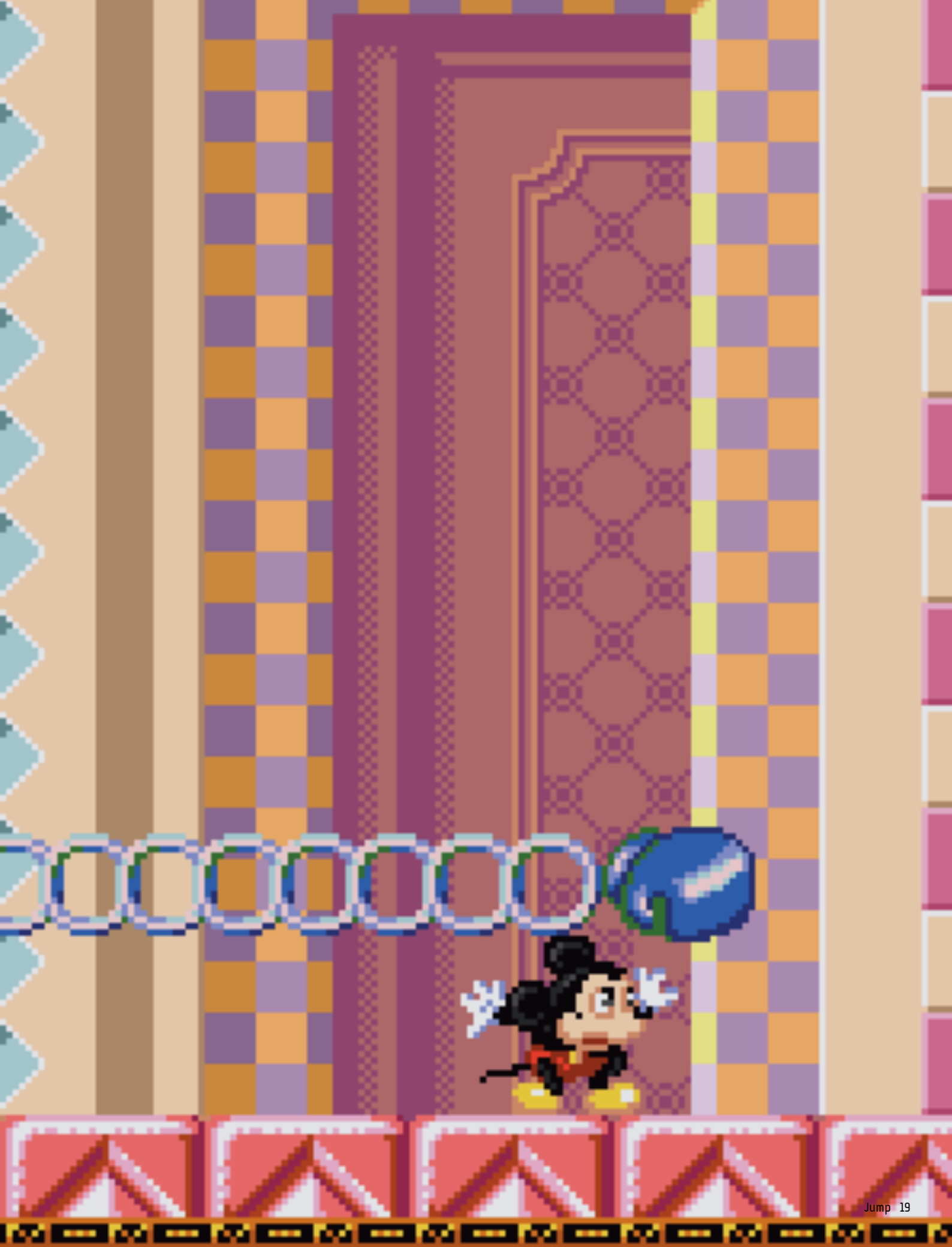
This is how you do a remake. It pays careful tribute to the source material, but sensibly updates it for a new generation of gamers. It's arguably the best Mickey Mouse game of the last generation, but it still pulled in relatively low scores.



CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE [Sega] 1990

■ *CASTLE OF Illusion's* Toyland stage lives on vibrantly in the mind of many a gamer. Bright colours, a jolly tune and a variety of friendly-looking wooden soldiers to bum-bounce into submission made for an easy-going playthrough in an engaging Disney locale. But everything changed when Mickey was dropped into the boss room. The backdrop turned headache-inducing and the music became a psychedelic synth nightmare to introduce this hideous clown-cum-birthday-present mutant. With a fixed grin and oversized shoes, the living box leapt around the screen on spring heels, stopping only to try and smash the terrified mouse with a room-spanning extendable boxing glove. While killing it was a simple matter of pattern learning, utilising the springs it would carelessly throw around the screen to jump up and bop it in the head, the clown's real power was the simple, unwavering ability to terrify young minds.





ALEX KIDD

IN MIRACLE WORLD



Before Sega gave us Sonic, we were treated to Alex Kidd. We look back at his first and best title



CONFRONT THE BOSS

Arguably the highlight of *Alex Kidd* were the bosses, well, some of them. Forgetting that stupid bull/pig thing that just ran at you, and the bear with a sword, you had Janken The Great's henchman waiting at the end of each key area. That's right, they wanted to play Janken with you (that's Rock, Paper, Scissors to you guys) before you could pass, and unless you had the Telepathy Ball or knew the routine, it was guesswork. Failure to win two out of three turned you to stone. As annoying as it was at times, they're still some of the most memorable boss confrontations we've ever had.



▲ He's got scissors for a head – how can you not know what he's going to play?

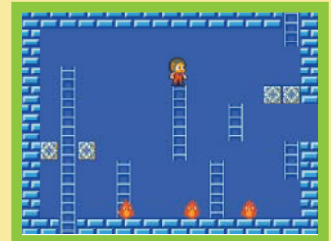
Release: 1986
Format: Master System
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-House

The words 'now there are no limits' are what the US were force-fed when the Master System was released in 1985. To this day, we are unsure of what was being implied by this slogan, as the Master System was limited in many ways, but it did provide a much-needed rival for the NES. Here in the UK we had to wait a year before we could sample Sega's Master System delights, but come 1986 – when some of us were strapping bin lids to our backs in an effort to look a little more like a Teenage Mutant Hero Turtle – it was our turn.

Alex Kidd In Miracle World arrived as a cute character in a cute world, who was out to rescue his people from a tyrant by way of platforming fun – it was a formula that was proven to be a success. This wasn't the high point for the title though, thanks to the continued success of the NES, *Mr Kidd* wasn't recognised as the gaming icon that he was and instead the masses concentrated their attentions



▲ So much blue sky... where did it all go, eh?



▲ Luckily, there are no snakes to go with the ladders.

on a certain plumber.

Nope, it wasn't until 1991, when Sega launched the Master System II, that things really took off for *Alex Kidd*. Due to the release of the Mega Drive, the Master System II was aimed at a younger audience: a smooth, bulbous design was complimented by a red sliding hood, and soon the angular Master System was just a memory. However, hidden beneath that red hood was a further treat... *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* was built-in.

Now we all know what a hassle it is having to insert a game into a machine. You've got to get a worthy title, open the box, remove the cartridge, put it in the machine – it's hard work. Well, none of this was necessary with *Miracle World*, you could just kick back and enjoy. And enjoy, people did. Thanks to the

unavoidable purchase of the game and the fact that it started when you powered up the machine, *Alex Kidd* finally got the acclaim it deserved – and is still a worthy play today.

Devoid of cheating Quick Saves and multiple save points, *Miracle World* was far tougher than first thought. If you wanted to collect all the cash, release all the evil ghosts and rack down every object, there was a fair amount of expertise required. Precision jumping with a little ape-boy who has a tendency to 'float' at the peak of every jump is not an easy task and there were some points in the game that were severely punishing if you hadn't mastered jumping sufficiently. The jungle area for example: there were spikes everywhere, tiny floating blocks provided the somewhat treacherous path through the stage and leaf-



▲ One of the toughest parts of any videogame we've ever played... and we've finished *Devil May Cry 3*.

"WITH MIRACLE WORLD, YOU COULD JUST KICK BACK AND ENJOY"

throwing monkeys just made your life harder – it was certainly no picnic.

That said, a decent player would have passed through the first castle and would have arrived at the final second one after about 45 minutes, but here's where it often went wrong. One room near the end of the second castle featured a drop-away floor that plunged you into a spike-filled water section. It was nearly impossible to continue as *Alex Kidd's* swimming controls left much to be desired. The trick? To use the Cane of Flight (available only twice in the entire game) to hover over the collapsible floor and up to the safely

of a tucked away ladder. Don't have the Cane of Flight? Don't have the insane skills necessary to conquer the water spikes? Then it's game over and you'll know for next time. Even using 800 cash and holding up while mashing B on the Game Over screen to get a crafty continue couldn't help you. It was pretty harsh.

Likewise, hidden in the first castle was a letter. You didn't need this to continue, but not bothering would leave you without the Stone Tablet – an object that told you the symbol combination needed to complete the last area. Without it you were doomed to perish at the hands of the many ghosts. What a game, eh?



OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF 1986



ON THE RADIO

Peter Gabriel's irritatingly catchy *Sledgehammer* haunted the charts in June. We doubt even the man himself could've been aware that years later he'd accidentally release the same song; only he'd change the words and call it *Steam*. This non-fact aside, *Sledgehammer's* popularity was largely due to the video showing Pete's face turn into lots of fruit.



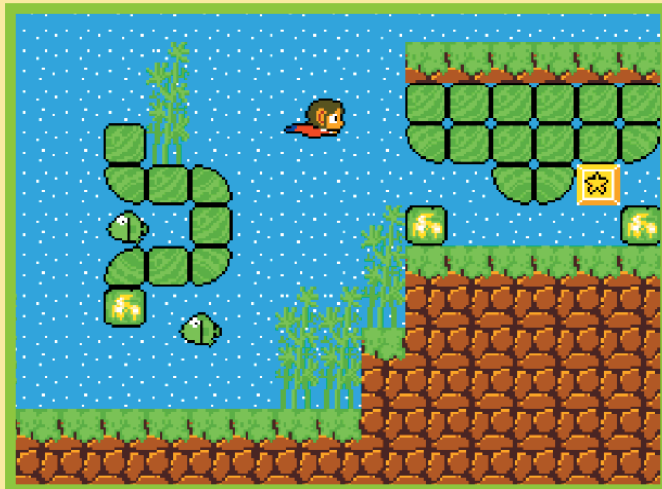
AT THE MOVIES

"Get away from her you bitch." For whatever reason, this line is what most took away from the frankly awesome *Aliens*. You paid your money and in return you received roughly 130 minute of James Cameron throwing HR Giger at you. Unfortunately, watching *Aliens* today only serves to remind you that *AVP* was easily the worst idea ever and a waste of perfectly good CGI.



ON THE TELEVISION

He-Man And The Masters Of The Universe was in full swing and kids everywhere were beating each other with swords of power (brooms) and discussing exactly how rubbish Mech-A-Neck was. Somehow children were unable to realise the level of poorness achieved by the toys which the series was based upon, even the squat model of Mossman – who 'really smells' – made Mattel a fair few pennies.



▲ Lose the boat and you ended up swimming through the stage and fighting bubble-blowing frog things. That's life.

Behind The Scenes

Aladdin

MAKING THE LEAP FROM THE BIG SCREEN TO VIDEOGAMES, ALADDIN PROVED THAT NOT ALL MOVIE LICENCES HAVE TO BE POOR PLATFORMERS. DAVID CROOKES TALKS TO DAVID PERRY ABOUT HIS MEGA DRIVE VERSION OF THE GAME AND WHY IT WAS THE BEST OF THE LOT...



▲ The game's action is varied and keeps players engrossed from beginning to end.



▲ Aah, the magic carpet ride. This fast-paced level required lightning-quick reflexes. Great fun.

Whenever a game developer was granted a film tie-in in the Eighties and early-Nineties, inevitably a platform game emerged. And while there were a few gems such as *Robocop* and *Nightbreed*, the majority were a mish-mash of uninspired tosh, tired re-hashes of a formula that trod the familiar path of controlling a character from the movie and bashing the hell out of any enemy which he – mainly he – would encounter. In that sense, the Mega Drive version of Disney's *Aladdin* is not too dissimilar. The player seizes control of Aladdin and fights his way through 11 levels while climbing up ropes and leaping across carefully placed platforms.

That it was one of the best platform games ever created for

the Mega Drive, however, caused this title to stand out. Putting aside the mixture of smooth animation, cartoon graphics and a set of diverse levels, all of which were noted in glowing reviews at the time, this 2D platformer had fast, flowing action. And it was funny. When you consider programmer David Perry had just 99 days to put this game together, this is pretty impressive. "The game had been languishing in development hell," says Perry, who was working for Virgin Interactive. "I think Blue Sky had been developing it but Sega, which had secured the rights to the Mega Drive version, was finding it difficult to get any approvals from Disney. At the time, though, we at Virgin had just got Sega's Game Of The Year award for *Global Gladiators* and Sega had just published our

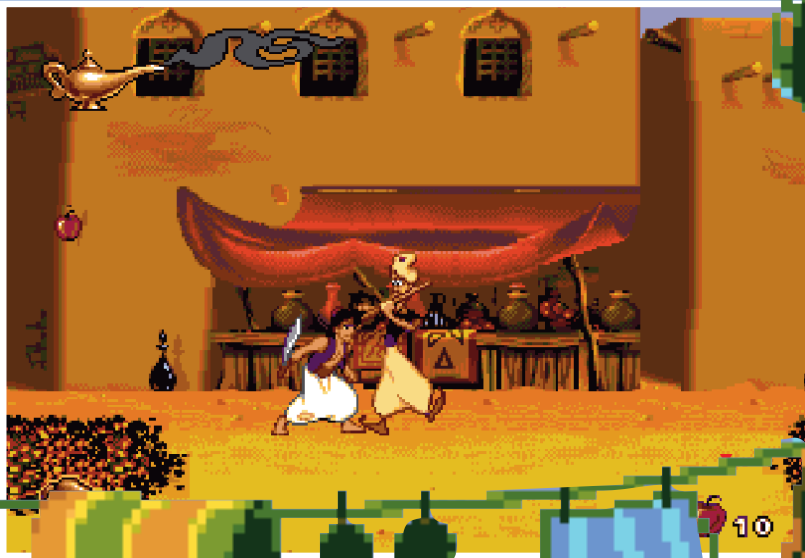
latest title, *Cool Spot*. So Sega came knocking on the door and said: 'Want to make *Aladdin*?' The twist was that we were already working on the game version of *The Jungle Book*, so I wonder if that's why Disney was also cool with the move to Virgin?"

Although Perry was assigned the task of project manager and programmer with responsibility for the animation engine, work on the game had already started. David Bishop, who was *Aladdin*'s director of design, had worked out the basics of the title and it was down to Perry and his assembled crew to put the thing together.

Perry was certainly excited by the task ahead and he drew on the ten years of experience he had built up in videogame programming. For Perry, who had begun his videogame career in 1982 at the age of 15, was already something of an industry stalwart. His first work had been to write computer game programming books for the ZX81 and he was spurred



▲ Aladdin's a pretty flexible dude, especially when he gets hit.



DAVE THE GENIE

AS WELL AS the in-game humour, Perry added a few more quirks. And one of these proved very useful – and helped to boost his profile. A cheat that was punched in on the title screen made Perry's face appear, with the words: "Ah, David Perry, what's your wish?" A few seconds later and another screen appeared giving a few options to cheat, including starting the game at a higher level. "I kept seeing that screen reprinted in magazines as people discovered the cheat," laughs Perry, "that was my standard cheat mode for programming." To access the cheat, go to the title screen, select options and highlight 'difficulty.' Now press ACACACACBBBB.

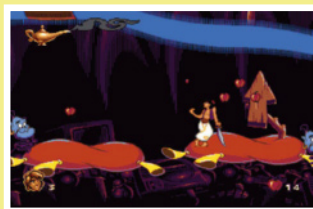


on not just by the results of his hard work but also by the cheques that had started to flood in. He continued to plug away, teaching himself as he went along, knowing videogaming would be his career path.

"In those days, you had to actually type the entire game in from a book – without mistakes," he says. "Hours later, you finally got to play. Or start looking for your mistakes. This looking at program code and fixing mistakes was a great way to gently learn programming." Soon after, he created a driving game that was printed in a magazine and a couple of years later, having begun to make a name for himself, he moved from his home in Lisburn, Northern Ireland, to London where he developed games for Mikro-Gen, Elite, Probe, US Gold and Mirrorsoft. In 1991, he moved to

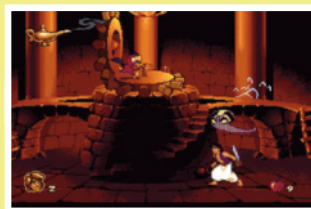
the US to work for Virgin and was ideally placed to work on *Aladdin*. In the end, it was a race against time.

"We were told that the VHS tapes of the movie were going to be shipping in three months' time," says Perry. "It meant we had one last chance to ride the wave of interest in *Aladdin* before the kids started to become involved in the next big thing. My brief was simple:



▲ If you pause for a moment, Aladdin will go into Casual mode.

don't miss that date. I remember sitting in the office of Tom Kalinske, president of Sega of America. We'd been given this insane deadline and we were 99 days from launch. So I said we'd need as much support as possible to pull it off and, luckily, he did support us. Not only that but Virgin and Disney threw their weight behind the game as well. I still had to sleep in my car to get the project finished on time though."



▲ Uh oh. Aladdin's in trouble again. Better stuff a cracker into Iago's beak.

Perry's work on *The Jungle Book* was pushed aside as he ploughed on with the new task at hand. But to speed up the making of *Aladdin*, Perry decided to use some of his *Jungle Book* code since that game was also being earmarked as a 2D platformer. "Having the *Jungle Book* engine and a killer team to work on *Aladdin* meant we had stuff up and running in no time," recalls Perry. "But the knock-on effect of this was that after *Aladdin*, I kind of looked at *The Jungle Book* and thought 'oh dear, we need to start again.' It would have been too similar."

Perry drew inspiration from *Sonic The Hedgehog* which was released in 1991. He tried to instil both the frenetic pace and the collectable element of that classic title into *Aladdin*. "Sonic blew me away," he reveals. "I was actually once offered a job at the Sega



OTHER VERSIONS

The Mega Drive version was so successful that it was used as the basis for ports to other machines. These included a Game Boy version in 1994, followed by one for the Game Boy Color in 2000 and there were also releases for the Amiga and PC.

Capcom produced the SNES version of the game and the first glaring difference is the absence of Aladdin's curved oriental sabre. This game more closely follows the movie's plot but is similar in that it uses in-film music and mini-games. Virgin may have produced this game had Capcom not had the rights to producing Disney films for Nintendo.

For that reason, it was this version that appeared on the NES and the Game Boy Advance. The licence had expired when the Game Boy and Game Boy Colour ports were produced. *Aladdin* was also released for the Master System and Game Gear, produced by SIMS, in 1994 and was more akin to *Prince Of Persia* (to which the storyline of *Aladdin* is similar) than any of the other versions.

Technical Institute and I would have been working with Yuji Naka [lead programmer of the original *Sonic*]. To be honest I was very tempted. I respected the programming his team did, immensely. When you're a programmer and you see something working that you know was groundbreaking for its time, it really inspires you to start trying a lot harder."

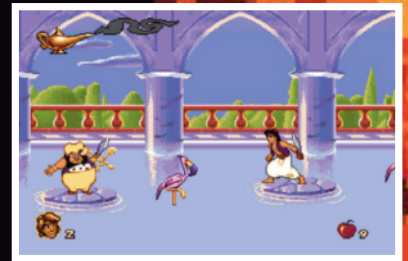
Of the many attributes that made *Aladdin* great, the graphics, in particular, come in for praise. They were breathtaking both in detail and the way they resembled the movie itself. Each level was brought to life with meticulous design and fluid character animation, with assistance from Walt Disney Feature Animation which created the game's sprites. It was pioneering stuff and it set the game apart from the SNES version created by Capcom without direct Disney involvement.

"The toughest part of putting the game together was the animation," reveals Perry. "Disney actually did the animation for us and this broke new ground. Basically, our lead animator, Mike Dietz, flew to Florida and directed the needs of the game, and the Disney animators drew up the frames. It was the animation which made this game really possible and it just blew us away. The industry had never seen animation that smooth." The team did all it could to preserve the work the Disney folk had done. "One of our guys, Christian Laursen, produced some astonishing artwork although I think the stuff he did for *Jungle Book* was even more amazing," says Perry. "Steve Crow also did some cool art and Bill Anderson did a lot of the level

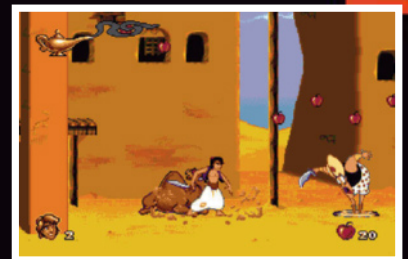
layout work. It was a big team and they all went on to do really great work."

While the designers perfected the graphics, Perry concentrated on producing the animation engine. "I'd been working on ways to compress animation into characters, then compressing those and re-building them on the fly," he said. "Amazingly, this works fast enough because, luckily, I'd got a badly translated Japanese tech manual for the Mega Drive and so I accidentally found a way to double the throughput of the machine. It was quite a while before Sega documented this 'feature' so I had a bit of an advantage."

The biggest problem Perry and his team faced was cramming all of the gameplay features, animation and sound into the game and then getting it tested. "There was a lot of pressure. Squeezing all those frames into the Mega Drive was technically impossible but luckily I had a guy called Andy Astor write an amazing tool for *Cool Spot* which also had a lot of animation. That compression tool called 'Dicer' saved the day. I really lucked out getting Andy on my team."



▲ Hit an enemy with an apple and his pants drop. Lovely boxers, pal.



▲ Another naughty trouser-dropping moment.

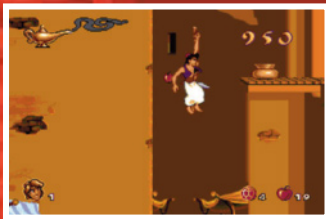
"EACH LEVEL WAS BROUGHT TO LIFE WITH METICULOUS DESIGN AND FLUID CHARACTER ANIMATION"

The side-scrolling platformer that resulted from this work pitted the player in a variety of distinct settings. The core premise of leaping across ledges and killing enemies with a whoosh of the sword remained throughout but collecting Genie or Abu icons thrust the player into one of two types of bonus rounds. The former was a game of luck which allowed the player to pick up apples, gems or extra lives while the latter enabled bonus items to be collected as they fell from the sky. "We loved the idea of mini-games in those days," says Perry.

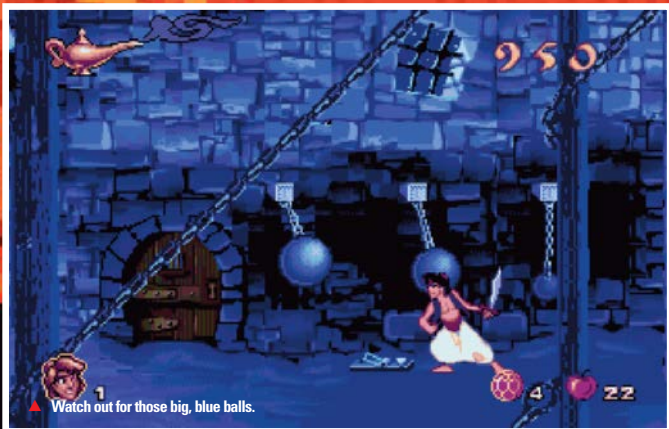
But it was while tearing through the streets of Agrabah, jumping on rooftops or feeling a little love in the Sultan's dungeon, that the game really thrilled and this remained all the way through to the stand-off in Grand Vizier Jafar's palace. "We wanted to try something new with each level. We did this with *Earthworm Jim* as well; the goal being that you can't predict what's coming next. We also ensured that the music would change too. Tommy Tallarico did the audio for us and this was really at the start of his career. At that time, he was really out to push audio as much as he could. He won awards on a lot of the titles we worked on

together simply because I gave him the resources he asked for." The music was taken from the movie, albeit it without the vocals. This lent an upbeat, familiar tone to the game and helped generate the feeling within the player of an interactive cartoon.

And with that came humour. The first time a guard is hit with an apple, it's hard not to smile when his trousers fall to the ground and his red-hearted boxer shorts are revealed to his immense horror. If you look closely you will also spot many references in the game, from a Sega Mega Drive in the background of the Inside the Lamp level to a skull bearing the familiar ears of Mickey Mouse later in the game. Perry said: "We did put little Disney references around and Disney seemed okay with it. I'm impressed people spotted them."



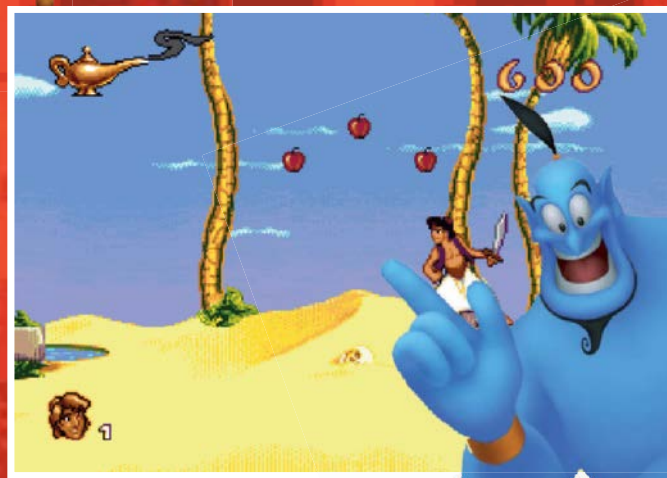
▲ Hanging on. The number of moves Aladdin can pull is impressive.



▲ Watch out for those big, blue balls.



Bouncing on the camel's head makes it spit, seeing off any enemies in its path.



Apples randomly placed in the sky? There's a whiff of *Sonic* here.

If there were any criticisms, it was the simplicity of the game. Getting from one end of a level to another was rather too easy at times and killing the enemies was a case of throwing an apple or using the sword. Each weapon allowed a different approach – the apples could be thrown from a distance while the more powerful sword was good for up-close hacking – yet, in comparison to today's games, the options were limited. "The game was pitched at a young audience," Perry explains. "And we tested the game with lots of kids. When you work with Disney they are very serious about reading speeds and things like that. So in the testing, anything that was too difficult was immediately fixed. The toughest part was the flamingo section so there's no doubt that watching kids play helped us improve the balance of the game. That said, we only got one chance to do that."

Aladdin was released in 1993 – and was on time. The game was showed off at the CES show to hundreds of members of the world's press. Among them was Jeffrey Katzenberg, who


had helped to save Walt Disney Studios in the Eighties and went on to become the founding partner and chairman of Dreamworks SKG in 1994. He took with him an all-singing, all-dancing *Aladdin* show. "Richard Branson parachuted in," says Perry. "It was a press launch bigger than any videogame had ever had."

Aladdin on the Mega Drive raked in around \$120 million at retail. But shortly afterwards, on 1 October 2003, Perry left Virgin and formed his own company in California called Shiny Entertainment. His first game with Shiny, *Earthworm Jim*, was created for many formats including the Mega Drive, SNES and PC. Shiny was eventually sold to Atari in 2002 and Perry is currently working on a project called *Top Secret*, which aims to produce the world's first gamer-developed massively multiplayer online game. He says it will be a driving game. "*Aladdin*, and the success it had, really showed me that this crazy job I was doing was rapidly turning into a career in a business that had a massive future," he said. "I'm so glad I stuck around."

THE **R****E****T****R****O** GUIDE TO...

Castlevania

As *Castlevania* hurtles towards the ripe old age of 30, games™ takes a look back over its blood-soaked heritage

 KONAMI'S *CASTLEVANIA* SERIES is undergoing something of a resurgence in popularity of late, thanks to MercurySteam's critically acclaimed and commercially successful *Lords Of Shadow* entries. However, videogame veterans will be aware that the bloody history of this vampire-slaying franchise stretches back almost thirty years, right the way back to Nintendo's 8-bit hardware.

Since the original *Castlevania* – known as *Akumajo Dracula* in its native Japan,

which translates as *Devil's Castle Dracula* – hit the Nintendo Famicom Disk System in 1986, we've seen instalments on a whole host of popular platforms, including the Mega Drive, N64, PlayStation and – more recently – the iPhone. The Belmont clan's eternal war against The Prince of Darkness has featured its fair share of twists and turns over the years, with some instalments becoming genre classics while others fall painfully short of the expected quality. Despite this, *Castlevania* boasts one of the most packed lineages in videogaming history, and its penchant for moody settings, whip-cracking action and brilliant music has secured it a legion of devoted fans. Over the next few pages we'll chart the sometimes tumultuous past of Konami's gothic masterpiece, covering all of the games released so far.



CASTLEVANIA 1986

■ The first entry in the series was originally an exclusive release for the Japan-only Famicom Disk System, but it was released on the NES in 1987. Focusing on the heroic Simon Belmont and his quest to destroy Dracula, the game followed a linear route through six different levels. It would later be ported to the Amiga, C64 and PC, with a Game Boy Advance release in 2004.

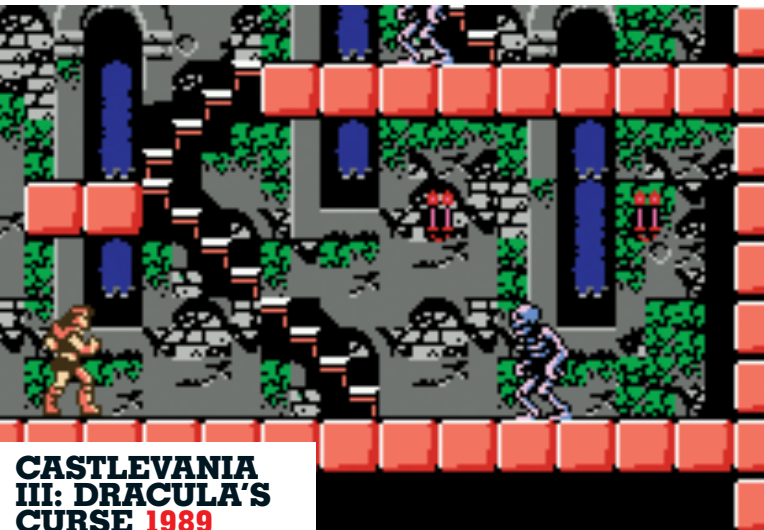


VAMPIRE KILLER 1986

■ Despite sharing gameplay, visuals and music with the NES original, the MSX2-only *Vampire Killer* – which was released in Japan, Europe and Brazil, but not the US – actually turned out to be a very different proposition. It was non-linear, featured RPG-like elements and had special items to collect.

HAUNTED CASTLE 1988

■ Most games series from the '80s usually appeared in arcades before moving to consoles, but *Castlevania* has never been one to follow convention. *Haunted Castle* took the core gameplay of the original and dramatically improved the visuals and sound, but sadly the end result wasn't as spectacular as it could have been. A Japan-only PS2 conversion appeared in 2006.



CASTLEVANIA III: DRACULA'S CURSE 1989

■ The third NES game is a real gem, mixing together multiple level paths, different playable characters and some of the best music on Nintendo's seminal 8-bit system. It was also notable for being the first game to showcase Alucard, Dracula's famous offspring.



CASTLEVANIA II: BELMONT'S REVENGE 1991

■ After *Castlevania: The Adventure*, *Belmont's Revenge* was a complete surprise. Considered by many fans to be one of the finest of the "old school" *Castlevania* titles, it pushed the host hardware to the limit. The soundtrack was especially good, with some truly amazing tunes courtesy of Hidehiro Funauchi.

CASTLEVANIA II: SIMON'S QUEST 1987

■ Following the lead of the RPG-like MSX2 *Vampire Killer*, *Simon's Quest* boasted an open-ended game world which was subject to a day and night cycle. Enemies were more powerful when the sun set, which gave combat an additional challenge. Like its direct predecessor, *Simon's Quest* made its debut on the Famicom Disk System before being ported to the NES in 1988.



SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV 1991

■ Essentially a remake of the NES original, *Castlevania's* 16-bit debut was rightly regarded as one of the Super NES' better titles. Eminently playable and dripping with atmosphere, the CD-quality soundtrack was a thing of beauty.



AKUMAJO DRACULA 1993

■ An exclusive for the Japan-only Sharp X68000 home computer, this was another remake of the original NES game. A PlayStation port – entitled *Castlevania Chronicles* – launched in 2001.

DRACULA X: RONDO OF BLOOD 1993

■ One of the best titles for NEC's PC Engine CD-ROM system, *Rondo Of Blood* combined anime-style cutscenes with a branching level design to great effect. It remained a Japanese exclusive until it was included as a bonus in the PSP remake in 2007. A Wii Virtual Console release followed in 2010.

CASTLEVANIA: THE NEW GENERATION / BLOODLINES 1994

■ *Castlevania's* first Sega outing was very special indeed. Set after the events of World War 1, the game allowed you to control one of two heroes: John Morris (son of Quincy from Bram Stoker's original Dracula novel) and Eric Lecarde. Level designs were inventive, taking the player to landmarks such as Atlantis, The Leaning Tower of Pisa and a German munitions factory.



CASTLEVANIA: DRACULA X 1995

■ Based on the PC Engine *Rondo of Blood*, *Dracula X* removed the non-linear progression and the additional playable character. Released in Europe as *Castlevania: Vampire's Kiss*, it's very hard to find today, despite the rather negative reaction it received.

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT 1997

■ The game which gave rise to the term "Metroidvania", *Symphony Of The Night* took the core *Castlevania* gameplay and added in a huge, gear-gated castle, as well as RPG elements such as experience points and different weapons, armour and items to collect. Another twist was the fact that the lead character was Dracula's troubled son Alucard.

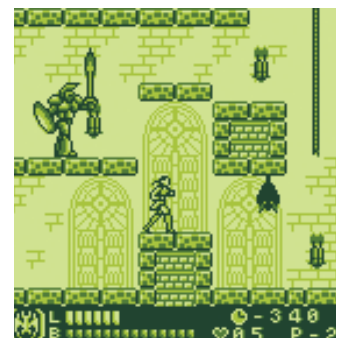


"SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT TOOK THE CORE CASTLEVANIA GAMEPLAY AND ADDED IN A GEAR-GATED CASTLE"



CASTLEVANIA: LEGENDS 1997

■ Notable for being the first game in the lineage to boast a female lead character, *Legends* sadly had little else going for it aside from its drive to promote gender equality. The level designs were poor, the action boring and the visuals worse than those seen in *Belmont's Revenge*. It's worth a pretty penny these days, but ignore unless you're a hardcore collector.



THE BELMONT CLAN

SIMON BELMONT

■ Arguably the franchise's most famous protagonist, Simon has starred in several outings, including the first two NES games, *Castlevania Judgement* and the recent *Lords Of Shadow: Mirror Of Fate*.



CHRISTOPHE BELMONT

■ The hero of the first two Game Boy titles, Christopher has to rescue his son Soleil in *Belmont's Revenge*.



TREVOR BELMONT

■ An ancestor of Simon Belmont, Trevor makes his debut in *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*. He also makes appearances in *Castlevania: Curse of Darkness* and *Lords Of Shadow: Mirror of Fate*.





BEHIND THE SCENES: INTERVIEW: DAVE COX

Castlevania series producer,
Konami

What made you a fan of the series?

The original 8-bit game was one of the first console games I ever bought. It really stood out on the shelf as it had silver packaging when most other games were black. I really liked the art on the cover and once I got it home, I was hooked. I bought each *Castlevania* game as it was released, but it was *Super Castlevania IV* that really made me realise I wanted to make games and I wanted to work in the industry specifically for Konami. It would be a few years later, but my dream eventually came true.

Which instalment is your personal favourite, and why?

Super Castlevania IV is my favourite. The atmosphere, variety of enemies and the music that was so dark and moody. I loved that game and in fact I still do, to me it's the best game in the series.

Few videogame franchises are able to remain relevant across several consecutive hardware generations. Why do you think *Castlevania* has been able to do this?

I think because it has managed to evolve over time and appeal to new audiences. The original games are very different from the N64 games and the *Metroidvanias* are very different from the classics. We've had a fighting game and more RPG elements and now we have a hack and slash style game. Game series usually get tired after two or three iterations, but

Castlevania has managed to avoid that with interesting new ideas and angles on the core themes of the series that have allowed it to remain fresh.

Castlevania has a reputation for amazing music; which soundtrack is the best, in your opinion?

Super Castlevania IV because it evokes a deep dark atmosphere and feels epic at the same time. I also like the soundtrack to *Symphony Of The Night*, especially the orchestral stuff.

As a fan, what has it been like to influence the direction of *Castlevania* and bring it to a new, wider audience?

Enjoyable, nerve-wracking, stressful and rewarding. There are a lot of pressures mostly from yourself to deliver something that will be memorable and hopefully stand the test of time. Throughout the development process we always felt we were making game history and we felt it and tried to honour the heritage of those who went before us.

Where would you like the series to go from here?

Honestly I don't have a strong opinion, I see this as a torch being passed down and it's our turn to pass the torch on. I am looking forward to seeing what a new team can bring to the mythology and universe of *Castlevania*.



CASTLEVANIA 64 1999

Castlevania's first step into the realm of 3D divided critics and fans alike, but was moderately successful in transporting the vampire-killing action to a new dimension. However, following *Symphony Of The Night* was a tough move, and time hasn't been kind to the rather crude visuals.



CASTLEVANIA: LEGACY OF DARKNESS 1999

The original N64 *Castlevania* was supposed to feature the wolfman Cornell, but he was removed at the last minute and instead stars in this sequel. Like its forerunner, *Legacy Of Darkness* wasn't perfect by any means, but had just about enough of the old *Castlevania* magic to make it worth a look.

CASTLEVANIA: CIRCLE OF THE MOON 2001

The first of three Game Boy Advance "Metroidvania" outings, *Circle Of The Moon* was a launch day game for Nintendo's handheld. Tiny sprites and very basic RPG elements made this a weak facsimile of *Symphony Of The Night*, but the next two games would improve on the formula.



CASTLEVANIA CHRONICLES 2001

Chronicles was essentially the Sharp X68000 *Akumajo Dracula* with a fresh lick of paint. It contained the original game and a new version with fresh character designs from Ayami Kojima, who also supplied the character artwork for *Symphony Of The Night*.

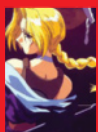


CASTLEVANIA: HARMONY OF DISSONANCE 2002

The second Game Boy Advance "Metroidvania", *Harmony Of Dissonance* contained improved visuals but noticeably worse music. The level design was also a little bland, but the inclusion of a dash move made it feel fast-paced and exciting.



SONIA BELMONT



Sonia starred in the disappointing *Castlevania Legends*. The game's story alludes to the fact that Alucard and

Sonia had a child – which seems to indicate that the Belmont line contains vampire blood.

RICHTER BELMONT



Star of *Rondo of Blood*, Richter would also feature in *Symphony Of The Night* and *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles*.

JUSTE BELMONT

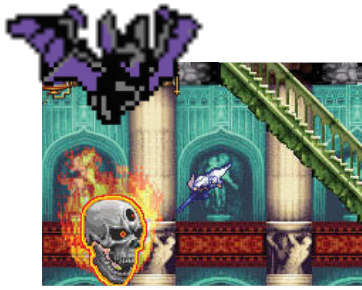


Simon's grandson and the hero of *Harmony Of Dissonance*, Juste is especially adept at spellcasting thanks to his Belnades lineage.

JULIUS BELMONT



Chronologically, it's Julius who is the most recent Belmont, having soundly defeated Dracula in 1999, prior to the events of *Aria Of Sorrow*.



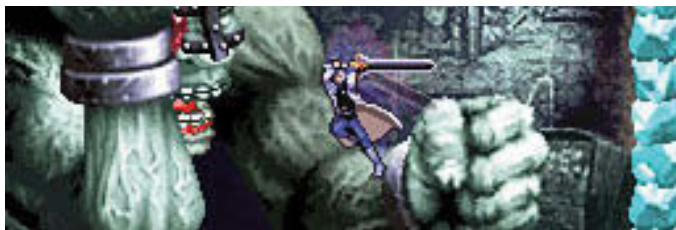
CASTLEVANIA: ARIA OF SORROW 2003

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CASTLEVANIA: LAMENT OF INNOCENCE 2003

■ Undeterred by the lukewarm critical reception afforded to the N64 instalments, Konami soldiered on into the 3D arena with *Lament Of Innocence*, a PS2 action adventure that once again tried to pull *Castlevania* free of its 2D heritage. The *Devil May Cry*-style action was thrilling, but the repetitive gameplay let it down.



JOHN MORRIS



■ Distant relation to the Belmonts and the son of Quincy Morris – a character from the original Bram Stoker novel – John fights against the resurrection of Dracula at the hands of the evil Elizabeth Bartley.



CASTLEVANIA: CURSE OF DARKNESS 2005

■ *Lament of Innocence* was followed by this PS2 and Xbox sequel, but despite a move towards a more open-ended game world – like the one seen in *Symphony Of The Night* – the same mistakes were sadly committed. For large portions of *Curse Of Darkness* you were simply battling the same enemies down identical corridors. An attempt to tie in the action with the events of *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse* livened things up a little, but not much.

"DESPITE A MOVE TOWARDS A MORE OPEN-ENDED WORLD, THE SAME MISTAKES WERE COMMITTED"

CASTLEVANIA: DAWN OF SORROW 2005

■ The first of three outings on the Nintendo DS, *Dawn Of Sorrow* was a direct sequel to the Game Boy Advance *Aria Of Sorrow*, and shared many of the same cast members. Aside from some rather gimmicky touch-screen spell drawing, it was a solid release that benefited from a soul-stealing power system, offering plenty of replay value.



CASTLEVANIA: PORTRAIT OF RUIN 2006

■ The second DS game took place after *Castlevania: Bloodlines*, and stars John Morris' son as the hero. Levels took place inside paintings, allowing the developers to be a bit more creative with the locations. While it didn't really do all that much new, *Portrait Of Ruin* proved just how enduring the Metroidvania format could be.

JONATHAN MORRIS



■ John Morris' son and one of the two heroes of *Portrait Of Ruin*. Rising to fame in 1944, he's one of the most recent vampire killers of the Belmont bloodline.

REINHARDT SCHNEIDER



■ This character from *Castlevania 64* was originally known as Schneider Belmont. Despite this, he's very much a Belmont and wields the whip as good as any of his ancestors.

CASTLEVANIA: ORDER OF SHADOWS 2007

■ Before iOS and Android turned up, mobile phone players were subjected to some pretty dire titles, and *Order Of Shadows* was one of them. Clunky controls, a narrow screen, terrible music and irksome action made this a *Castlevania* entry to forget. Thankfully, few know it even existed.



CASTLEVANIA: THE DRACULA X CHRONICLES 2007

■ A 2.5D remake of *Rondo Of Blood*, *Dracula X Chronicles* also included the PC Engine version as well as *Symphony Of The Night*, both in emulated form. The remake itself was merely OK – the new visuals actually look worse than those of the 8-bit original – but having all three games in a single package made this an appealing purchase.



LEON BELMONT



■ Born in the 11th century, Leon is technically the first Belmont to take up the fight against Dracula. He is the lead of the PS2 title *Castlevania: Lament Of Innocence*.

CASTLEVANIA: ORDER OF ECCLESIA 2008

■ The final instalment on the DS is unique in offering the first female lead since *Castlevania Legends*, but some commented at the time of release that the Metroidvania format was growing rather stale.



CASTLEVANIA: THE ARCADE 2009

■ *Castlevania's* return to amusement arcades was something of a departure for the franchise. Instead of being an action platformer, it took the form of a light gun game in the same vein as *Time Crisis* and *Virtua Cop*, but with whipping replacing blasting. The game remains an arcade exclusive.

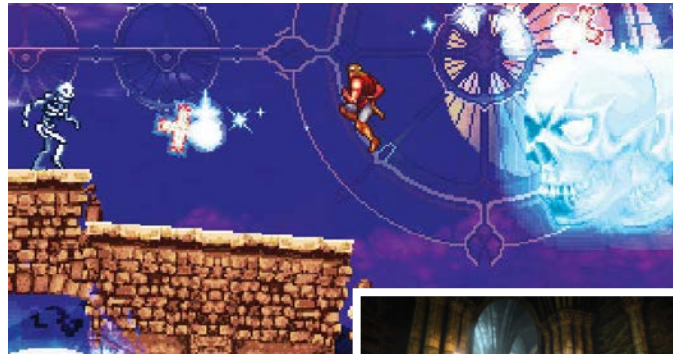


CASTLEVANIA JUDGMENT 2008

■ This ill-advised attempt to turn *Castlevania* into a 3D, arena-based brawler was as bad as it sounds on paper. Characters are pulled from several games thanks to a hokey time travel plot line, and the anime-style visuals – created by Death Note manga artist Takeshi Obata – felt hopelessly at odds with the *Castlevania* series.

CASTLEVANIA: THE ADVENTURE REBIRTH 2009

■ Alongside *Gradius* and *Contra*, *Castlevania* was given the "Rebirth" treatment on Nintendo's WiiWare download service. Despite the title, this had little to do with the Game Boy original, and was instead a very impressive old-school outing complete with fine 2D visuals, a soundtrack packed with famous tunes and a beastly level of challenge. Worth every penny, then.



CASTLEVANIA: HARMONY OF DESPAIR 2010

■ Xbox Live Arcade title *Harmony Of Despair* is indicative of just how confused and rudderless the *Castlevania* series was prior to the *Lords Of Shadow* reboot. Part online multiplayer title, part traditional Metroidvania, the result was a confused mess which turned out to be neither fun to play nor particularly impressive.



CASTLEVANIA PUZZLE: ENCORE OF THE NIGHT 2010

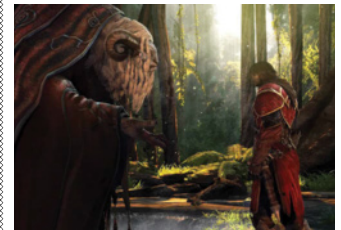
■ Those hoping for a true sequel to *Symphony Of The Night* were disappointed to discover that this iOS outing was little more than a derivative puzzle game with assets stripped from the original 1997 classic. Fun for a while, but the *Castlevania* name felt entirely tacked-on.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2010

■ With sales dwindling and fans becoming increasingly restless for a return to form, Konami took a massive gamble with this 360 and PS3 offering. Spanish developer MercurySteam was brought on board, and even Hideo Kojima was involved at one point. The final product was exactly what the series needed; packed with *God Of War*-style action and some stunning visuals, *Lords Of Shadow* annoyed purists but delighted practically everybody else. It's the most commercially successful *Castlevania* game to date, which speaks volumes.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2 2013

■ Not yet released at the time of writing, *Lords Of Shadow 2* places you in the role of Dracula as he navigates a Gothic, modern-day city in an effort to reclaim his former powers.



CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW – MIRROR OF FATE 2013

■ MercurySteam's 3DS sequel is set in the middle of the *Lords Of Shadow* trilogy and pays fan service by including Simon Belmont, Trevor Belmont and Alucard – albeit in a drastically re-imagining storyline which pays little attention to series canon. The 2.5D platforming action was combined with methodical combat, making for a game which was unique, even when placed alongside other 2D entries.

GABRIEL BELMONT



■ The hero of *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*, Gabriel is voiced by Scottish actor Robert Carlyle and is deeply troubled by the death of his beloved.

DESMOND BELMONT

■ The central character of the mobile title *Castlevania: Order Of Shadows*. Desmond is notable predominantly for his spiky haircut.



“The atmosphere, the music and the gameplay all kinda come together, and all the mistakes that happened with Castlevania were fixed to a certain extent”

DAVID COX, KONAMI

WHY I



Super Castlevania IV

DAVID COX, KONAMI

“That’s easy. I love Super Castlevania IV because for me it’s Castlevania perfected. It’s the original concept perfected, and what I really love about it is that the atmosphere, the music and the gameplay all kinda come together, and all the mistakes that happened with Castlevania were fixed to a certain extent. I suppose Castlevania IV came at a time in my life when I was really into games and I remember I got the game – I got the Japanese version actually cause I had the Super Famicom – I played it all night until sun-up and loved it. I just became obsessed with Castlevania. It’s what made me want to work in videogames, and it’s what made me want to work for Konami... It’s fate.”







THE **RETRO** GUIDE TO...
**SONIC THE
HEDGEHOG**

Sega's mascot shows no sign of slowing down after more than two decades on the run, with new games and a fifth TV series on the way. What better way to prepare than to revisit the highs and lows of Sonic's gaming career?

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

WITH OVER 50 videogames, multiple TV shows and a comic series that has run for over two decades, Sonic is easily one of the most recognisable characters in videogames. Unlike peers Pac-Man and Mario, Sonic was consciously designed as the face of his company, originating as Naoto Oshima's winning entry in a company-wide competition to design a new mascot.

With the aid of Yuji Naka's programming talents and

Hirokazu Yasuhara's game design, the blue hedgehog's debut game hit big and established Sega as a force to be reckoned with.

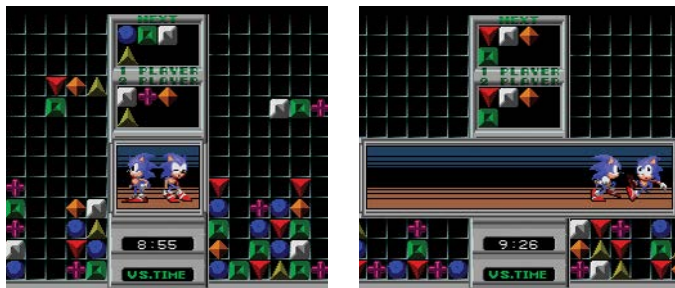
This year sees Sonic reinvented again with a new design unveiled for *Sonic Boom*, a project that includes two new games and a fifth TV series. With details of the games now emerging, the time is right to examine Sonic's back catalogue – and where he has tripped up.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 1991

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE

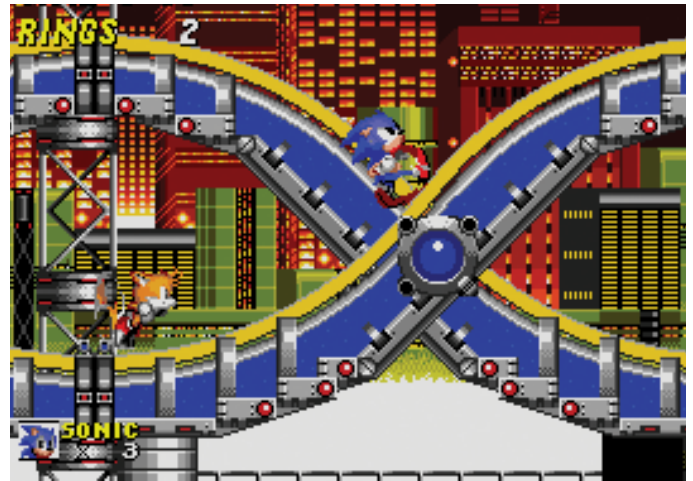
The only thing that time has taken from Sonic's debut is impact, as every gamer is now familiar with the rolling hills and loops of the Green Hill Zone. The striking thing about Sonic's first platform adventure is that it contains some very slow stages, with the deliberate pace of Marble Zone and Labyrinth Zone contrasting with Sonic's reputation as a speedy critter. Speed is very much a privilege in this game, with players rewarded for memorising routes with increasingly smooth runs. It's an easy game that lacks some now-standard series features, but this is indisputably a landmark platformer.



SONIC ERASER 1991

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE

Sonic's first ever spin-off game is the first in a long lineage of titles. Unfortunately, it is a largely unremarkable puzzle game, notable mostly for its obscurity. *Sonic Eraser* was originally made available for download via the Japan-only Mega Drive Modem that utilised the Meganet service introduced by Sega in 1990. This game spent over a decade seemingly consigned to history as a long-forgotten relic until eventually resurfacing via B-Club, a retro download service that Sega operated in Japan.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2 1992

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE

Produced in the USA by a mixed team of Japanese and American staff, *Sonic 2* had a troubled development phase that resulted in an unusually high number of abandoned concepts. However, none of that was evident when the game launched to incredible fanfare in November 1992. Emphasising the strong points of the original game, *Sonic 2* included a greater number of stages and lifted Sonic's speed cap. It also introduced a number of recurring elements in the series, including the invincible Super Sonic, the instant acceleration Spin Dash technique and the first of Sonic's many friends, Tails. As well as following Sonic around stages and ruining your chances of beating the special stages, the flying fox competed against Sonic in the split-screen multiplayer mode.

"EVERY GAMER IS NOW FAMILIAR WITH THE ROLLING HILLS AND LOOPS OF THE GREEN HILL ZONE"



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2 1992

SYSTEM: MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR

While Sonic's first 8-bit outing was loosely based on the Mega Drive original, *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* is a wholly different game to its 16-bit counterpart. Following Sonic's quest to rescue a kidnapped Tails, the game introduced vehicles to the series, including mine carts and hang gliders and made for another fine outing. Unfortunately, the smaller display of the Game Gear version greatly increases the difficulty of certain sections – most infamously the first boss, who represents a much more trivial obstacle on the Master System version of this sequel.



SONIC SPINBALL 1993

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

■ *Sonic Spinball* was the first of Sonic's major spin-off outings, released to cover the lack of a Mega Drive platformer for the 1993 holiday season. Inspired by the pinball action of *Sonic 2*'s Casino Night Zone, the game expanded on the pinball formula with large multi-table environments and boss battles. Although it only contains four stages, they're relatively tough. *Sonic Spinball* is a perfectly serviceable game, but nothing incredible.



SONIC 3 1994

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE

■ Another game, another new character – and this time it's a foe in the form of Knuckles, a hot-tempered echidna. Beyond that, the third of Sonic's Mega Drive platformers plays it safe, with stages that are larger but less numerous than those in *Sonic 2*. Bosses now appear at the end of all stages, too. The inclusion of a save game feature was criticised for making the game too easy, especially given its relatively short length, but it's another high quality platform game.



SEGASONIC THE HEDGEHOG 1993

SYSTEM: ARCADE

■ For Sonic's arcade debut, Sega took the unusual step of removing him from his usual side-scrolling environment and sticking him in a trackball-controlled isometric platformer. That wasn't the only change, as an energy bar replaced Sonic's traditional system of carrying rings to ensure his safety. Sonic gained some new mates in Mighty and Ray, who joined in for three-player action. While this game has been sighted in the UK and elsewhere, it isn't known to have been officially released outside of Japan – an odd move, considering the massive global popularity of the character at the time.



SONIC CD 1993

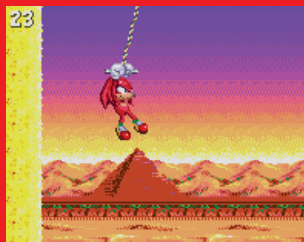
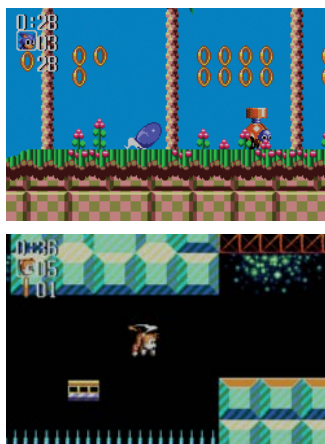
SYSTEM: MEGA-CD

■ Sonic's only outing on Sega's expensive add-on was an unusual affair, with character designer Naoto Oshima taking the reigns as game director. Sonic was able to travel back and forth in time during each stage in an attempt to fix the future, experiencing different level layouts as a result. This necessitated a different style of stage design compared to Sonic's other 2D platformers, as he is expected to backtrack often and explore each stage thoroughly. An impressive 3D-style special stage and a CD soundtrack capped off the package, serving to show off the advantages of the format.

SONIC CHAOS 1993

SYSTEM: MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR

■ Having done a good job with the 8-bit version of *Sonic 2*, developer Aspect was tasked with creating an exclusive platformer for Sega's low-end formats. *Sonic Chaos* introduces Tails to the 8-bit consoles and gives Sonic some nifty new power-ups including spring shoes and rocket shoes, but exhibits a noticeably uneven difficulty level, with regular stages being far too easy and special stages often rather tough.



SONIC & KNUCKLES 1994

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE

■ Released just eight months after *Sonic 3*, *Sonic & Knuckles* sees the two titular rivals joining forces, as Knuckles realises that Robotnik is a tad evil and joins the playable cast. The game's cartridge includes another cartridge slot, allowing players to plug other games into the top of the cartridge. Plugging in *Sonic 2* makes Knuckles available in the older game, but connecting to *Sonic 3* is the far more enticing prospect as *Sonic & Knuckles* is essentially the second part of that game. Combined, they become one large adventure that stands as the best of Sonic's 2D outings.

SONIC DRIFT 2 1995

SYSTEM: GAME GEAR

■ The first *Sonic Drift* was a racing spin-off only released in Japan, but the sequel managed to gain a European release. It's tempting, as a racing game with power-ups, to compare it to *Mario Kart*, but it feels far closer to 8-bit conversions of *OutRun* and *Super Monaco GP* due to the limitations of the platform.





SONIC CHAMPIONSHIP 1996

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Sega's legendary AM2 team took the helm for this arcade release, that along with *Virtua Fighter Kids* represented a drive to make fighting games more appealing to younger players. Based on the *Fighting Vipers* engine, it's a frantic fighter that isn't particularly deep. New characters include Bark, a polar bear, and Bean, a bomb-throwing duck whose design harks back to Sega's cutesy beat-'em-up *Dynamite Dux*. A Sonic-style version of *Fighting Vipers'* Honey was also designed but dropped, finally appearing in the game's PSN/XBLA release.



SONIC R 1997

SYSTEM: SATURN, PC

Traveller's Tales returned for the Saturn's only exclusive *Sonic* game, an on-foot racing spin-off. The game's five tracks include a variety of hidden items that can only be discovered by exploring the massive number of additional routes available. *Sonic R* was a technical showcase for the Saturn, displaying graphical tricks like transparency that had been thought impossible on the hardware.



SONIC SHUFFLE 2000

SYSTEM: DREAMCAST

Released in the wake of Nintendo's popular *Mario Party*, *Sonic Shuffle* is a similar compilation of mini-games that featured cel-shaded graphics, then in vogue thanks to *Jet Set Radio*. It's another spin-off that fails to hit the mark though, thanks to long load times and AI opponents that blatantly cheat.



SONIC ADVENTURE 1998

SYSTEM: SATURN, PC

Originally conceived as a Saturn game, *Sonic Adventure's* development switched to the Dreamcast as the fading fortunes of Sega's black box became apparent. Sonic's first 3D platform game is the first to prominently feature his friends – all six characters have different play styles ranging from item-hunting to fishing, and their stories must be played to reach the game's true ending. The game also added the popular Chao-raising mini-game, in which players could raise a virtual pet on the Dreamcast and via the system's Visual Memory handheld console/memory card hybrid. While *Sonic Adventure* was well received at the time, selling over a million copies and later earning a GameCube port, playing it today reveals a wayward camera and some rather linear stage designs.



SONIC ADVENTURE 2 2001

SYSTEM: DREAMCAST, GAMECUBE

Launched exactly ten years after the first game, *Sonic Adventure 2* would be the mascot's last outing on a Sega console. Reprising the platform, shooting and item-hunting gameplay styles from *Sonic Adventure*, the game allowed you to play as either the heroic trio of Sonic, Tails and Knuckles or the dark side, consisting of Robotnik and two newcomers, Rouge and the much-maligned Shadow. It's a big graphical upgrade over its predecessor and the platforming stages are improved, but bizarre design choices mess up the shooting and item-hunting stages, resulting in an uneven game that offers both fun and frustration in equal measure.



SONIC 3D: FLICKIES' ISLAND 1996

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, SATURN

Sonic's Mega Drive swansong was an isometric platformer developed by Traveller's Tales that employed pre-rendered CGI sprites – a style that had been popularised by Nintendo's *Donkey Kong Country* a couple of years prior. Sonic was tasked with rescuing Flickies and leading them to various exits, a gameplay mechanic borrowed from Sega's 1984 arcade release *Flicky*. The Saturn release was a late replacement for the cancelled *Sonic Xtreme*, and sports improved visuals as well as a brand new polygonal special stage designed by Sonic Team.



SONIC POCKET ADVENTURE 1999

SYSTEM: NEO GEO POCKET COLOR

While this game wasn't the blue hedgehog's first appearance on a non-Sega console – the atrocious Tiger Game.com version of *Sonic Jam* takes that title, unfortunately – *Sonic Pocket Adventure* is an excellent 'greatest hits' remix of the Mega Drive games. The game, developed by Sonic Team and SNK, was released exclusively for the handheld Neo Geo Pocket Color. It includes hidden puzzle pieces in every stage, encouraging exploration and repeat play.





SONIC ADVANCE 2001

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE, N-GAGE

■ The first *Sonic* game to be developed primarily for a Nintendo console is a pretty straightforward 2D platformer that is much like the Mega Drive games, right down to the ability to have Tails follow Sonic with a cheat code. Grind rails are the main new addition, carried over from *Sonic Adventure 2*. This game also marks the first involvement of Dimps, the development team responsible for most new 2D and handheld *Sonic* games in recent years.

"SONIC HEROES SHOWS THE SERIES BEGINNING TO FALTER"



SONIC HEROES 2003

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

■ *Sonic Heroes* shows the series beginning to falter. The idea of controlling teams that specialise in speed, power and flight is solid, and the game ditches Dreamcast-era inclusions such as Chao-raising and includes special stages inspired by the Mega Drive games. However, technical issues such as a poor camera mar the experience, with the PS2 version suffering the worst due to additional glitches and a lower frame rate. The 12 characters also highlighted the abundance being introduced to the series.



SONIC RUSH 2005

SYSTEM: DS

■ Where Sonic struggled with the crossover to 3D, he was flourishing in 2D – after a few years of dodgy spin-offs and main series missteps, *Sonic Rush* was a critical success. Having refined a heavily speed-focused style of 2D platforming on the Game Boy Advance, Dimps placed that action into new tall stages that took place across both screens of the DS, with Sonic now able to charge through enemies at top speed with the new boost move – just as long as he could maintain a combo.

SONIC RIDERS 2006

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

■ The third distinct racing spin-off branch of the *Sonic* series puts the blue hedgehog and chums on hoverboards. Characters are able to use different shortcuts based on their own attributes, which is a nice idea. The game is never anything beyond passable, but has somehow earned itself two sequels, including one for Kinect.



THE B TEAM

When Sonic's friends took centre stage...



DR ROBOTNIK'S MEAN BEAN MACHINE 1993

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

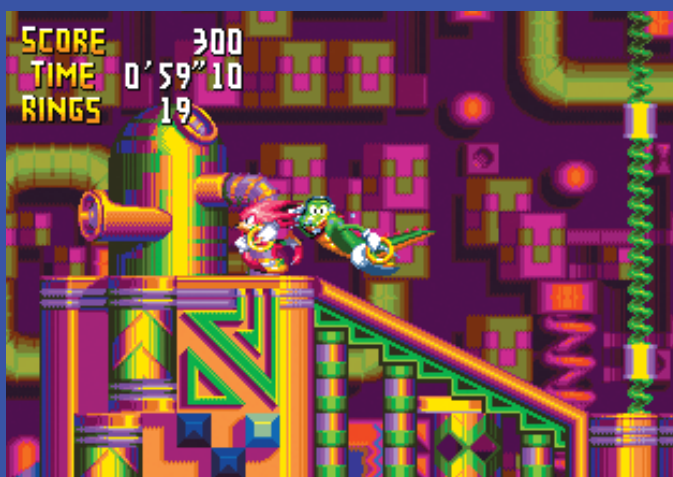
■ The re-skinning of Japanese puzzle games was a common practice during the Nineties, with *Puyo Puyo* serving as the donor here, inspiring games such as *Tetris Attack* and *Kirby's Ghost Trap*. Unusually, it uses character designs from the *Adventures Of Sonic The Hedgehog* cartoon, including the robotic henchmen Scratch, Grounder and Coconuts.



TAILS AND THE MUSIC MAKER 1994

SYSTEM: PICO

■ Tails' first star turn of the *Sonic* series comes from an unusual source, a Western-developed game for Sega's Pico, an edutainment console that enjoyed a long life in Japan but failed to make a significant impact anywhere else in the world. *Tails And The Music Maker* aims to teach children about music, including scales, tempo, rhythm and instrument identification.



KNUCKLES' CHAOTIX 1995

SYSTEM: 32X

■ Knuckles was thrust into the starring role in a rather divisive game, the only 32X release in the series. Playing much like a regular *Sonic* platformer, the game's gimmick sees two characters attached by rings, with an elastic effect causing them to ping about the screen together.

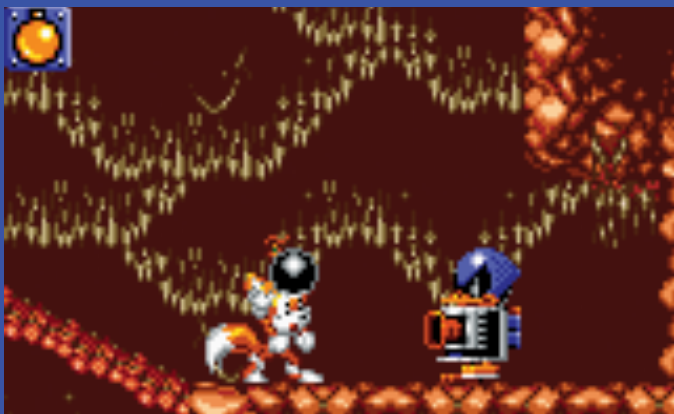


THE RETRO GUIDE TO... SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

TAILS' SKYPATROL 1995

SYSTEM: GAME GEAR

■ This Japan-only release is a pseudo-shoot-'em-up, that sees Tails taking on the villain Witchcart in a plane. It's extremely difficult to the point of being off-putting, despite looking like it's for kids. Recent compilations have made the game easier to acquire for non-Japanese players, though only masochists will be interested.



TAILS ADVENTURES 1995

SYSTEM: GAME GEAR

■ Tails' last star turn is a more traditional platform game, that leaves behind the high-speed action of regular *Sonic* games and introduces more puzzle-based gameplay. Tails has all kinds of items at his disposal, including bombs, a hammer and a remote controlled robot. Unexpectedly, this one's a good game.



SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG 2005

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

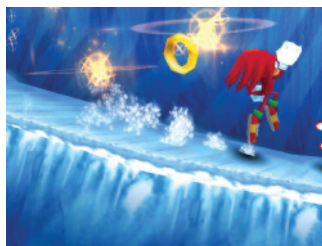
■ Shadow's only starring role adds weapons and vehicles to the *Sonic Adventure* formula, as well as a morality system and branching progression. The creative decision to take the series in a 'mature' direction was ill-advised and the game was technically inept, making this a high-profile failure that is best forgotten.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2006

SYSTEM: XBOX 360, PLAYSTATION 3

■ Easily the nadir of Sonic's long history, this game does nearly everything wrong. Sonic continues the 3D platforming style of *Sonic Adventure*, Shadow gets the gunplay and vehicle usage of his own spin-off game, and new boy Silver is a slow character who uses telekinesis to manipulate objects. The flawed designs combine with a risible creative reboot that sees Sonic romancing a human princess and a creepy, realistic Robotnik, resulting in an already unbearable game. The technical problems plunge the game into the crevasse, with numerous bugs suggesting a rushed, half-finished release. Quite frankly, it's an embarrassment to all involved.



SONIC RIVALS 2006

SYSTEM: PSP

■ Developed by Backbone Entertainment, this portable title adds an element of competition to the classic 2D platforming template of the series, pitting Sonic, Knuckles, Shadow and Silver against each other in one-on-one races. It's a reasonable game, but some flawed level design detracts from the fun. A sequel followed, naturally.



SONIC AND THE SECRET RINGS 2007

SYSTEM: WII

■ An on-rails platformer with an *Arabian Nights* theme, *Sonic And The Secret Rings* removes the technical issues of other 3D *Sonic* games at the cost of curtailing freedom. A flawed upgrade system severely hampers the game, even requiring you to upgrade control response. A sequel followed, based on Arthurian legends.

MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES 2007

SYSTEM: WII, DS

■ Sonic finally appears in a game with arch-rival Mario. It's a pretty decent party game, and sold millions despite most Wii owners already having *Wii Sports*. The series has continued as a result of the strong sales.





SONIC CHRONICLES: THE DARK BROTHERHOOD 2008

SYSTEM: DS

Plot has never been a particularly strong suit for the *Sonic* series, so the announcement of a *Sonic* RPG was something of a surprise – but bigger still was the surprise that BioWare was to develop it. The young potential audience required a lightweight story and easy progress, but the RPG specialists delivered a decent experience in spite of these shortcomings. This game didn't get a sequel, most likely due to EA's acquisition of BioWare.



SONIC UNLEASHED 2008

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Sonic's disastrous 2006 reboot necessitated a rethink, and *Sonic Unleashed* was the result. The new platforming template showed promise, despite some wonky control and the abundance of bottomless pits. It even dropped non-*Sonic* characters to focus on the hedgehog himself. Unfortunately, Sega seemed to be less than confident about its new direction and saddled the game with a dreadful item-based progression system and the much-derided debut of the Werehog, a monstrous form of Sonic whose stretchy limbs were used for mediocre 3D beat-'em-up sections. It's an improvement on *Sonic The Hedgehog*, but still not a game that we'd actually recommend.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 4: EPISODE I 2010

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Designed to appeal to long-time fans of *Sonic's* classic Mega Drive outings, this is a 2D platformer that revisits old level archetypes. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite manage to live up to the quality of the games that inspired it. *Sonic The Hedgehog 4: Episode I* is short and highly derivative, with level designs that veer into tribute act territory, and *Sonic's* physics are bizarre and somewhat broken. *Episode II*, released in 2012, resolved some of the problems seen in the first episode, and reintroduced Tails with some new co-operative moves.



SONIC COLOURS 2010

SYSTEM: WII, DS

Set in an interstellar theme park, *Sonic Colours* tasks Sonic with rescuing aliens that are being used as a power source. The game utilises the hybrid 2D/3D platforming template introduced in *Sonic Unleashed*, with Sonic gaining a range of new abilities as the aliens – known as Wisps – also function as power-ups. These abilities enabled all kinds of new level designs, making for one of the best *Sonic* games of recent times – a legitimately good platformer in the main series after years of disappointment. It's also one of the most graphically impressive games on the Wii.



SONIC GENERATIONS 2011

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

To celebrate 20 years of the *Sonic* series, Sonic Team devised a time travel plot that sees the shorter, pudgier Sonic of 1991 meeting his modern counterpart and taking on stages from the history of the series. Classic *Sonic's* stages are all 2D designs, while modern *Sonic* reprises the *Unleashed/Colours* platforming template. The game works very well – the re-imagined versions of Green Hill Zone and Chemical Plant Zone prove thrilling to speed through as modern Sonic, and even the bad games inspire good stages, particularly classic *Sonic's* version of Crisis City. While it's not nearly perfect – the game is quite short and boss battles are often relatively weak – it's a fitting celebration of the series and a pretty good platform game overall.

SONIC & ALL-STARS RACING TRANSFORMED 2012

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Building on *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, developer Sumo Digital introduced vehicles that can transform to race on land, sea and air. The game is practically a love letter to classic Sega fans, with representation for rarely-seen games like *Skies Of Arcadia* and *Burning Rangers*. With an excellent handling model and deep single-player mode, it's easily the best *Sonic* spin-off yet released.





SONIC LOST WORLD 2013

SYSTEM: WII U, 3DS

■ *Sonic Lost World* is a beautiful game, with the bold colours and simple shapes of the Mega Drive era brought into 3D with a minimum of modernisation. For all the negativity surrounding Nintendo's confusingly-launched system, it's very capable of providing the player with pretty and engaging experiences; the issue here is not how it looks but how it plays. The retro visual approach contrasts sharply with the actual gameplay – *Sonic Lost World* is a 3D platformer that takes place across cylindrical stages, making it a bit of a strange one to wrap your head around. The control system has been totally changed, with Sonic's default speed slowed to the point that a run button has been added. Not exactly what you think of when you think of Sonic. Unfortunately, both speeds often prove unsatisfactory, with walking too sluggish and running too imprecise, making it hard to establish any kind of rhythm. Worse yet, the game is prone to massive difficulty spikes. Sonic Team's desire to innovate with the series is commendable, but *Sonic Lost World* just proved too uneven to love.



"SONIC'S DISASTROUS 2006 REBOOT NECESSITATED A RETHINK, AND SONIC UNLEASHED WAS THE RESULT"



AND THE REST...

Everything else that Sonic has starred in

- **SONIC DRIFT**
YEAR: 1994 SYSTEM: GAME GEAR
- **SONIC THE HEDGEHOG'S GAMEWORLD**
YEAR: 1994 SYSTEM: PICO
- **SONIC TRIPLE TROUBLE**
YEAR: 1994 SYSTEM: GAME GEAR
- **SONIC LABYRINTH**
YEAR: 1995 SYSTEM: GAME GEAR
- **SONIC'S SCHOOLHOUSE**
YEAR: 1996 SYSTEM: PC
- **SONIC BLAST**
YEAR: 1996 SYSTEM: MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR
- **SONIC JAM**
YEAR: 1997 SYSTEM: SATURN
- **SONIC ADVANCE 2**
YEAR: 2002 SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE
- **SONIC MEGA COLLECTION**
YEAR: 2002 SYSTEM: VARIOUS
- **SONIC PINBALL PARTY**
YEAR: 2003 SYSTEM: SONIC PINBALL PARTY
- **SONIC BATTLE**
YEAR: 2003 SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE
- **SONIC ADVANCE 3**
YEAR: 2004 SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE
- **SONIC RUSH ADVENTURE**
YEAR: 2007 SYSTEM: DS
- **SONIC RIVALS 2**
YEAR: 2007 SYSTEM: PSP
- **SONIC X**
YEAR: 2007 SYSTEM: LEAPSTER
- **SONIC RIDERS ZERO GRAVITY**
YEAR: 2008 SYSTEM: WII, PLAYSTATION 2
- **SEGA SUPERSTARS TENNIS**
YEAR: 2008 SYSTEM: VARIOUS
- **SONIC AND THE BLACK KNIGHT**
YEAR: 2009 SYSTEM: WII
- **MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES**
YEAR: 2009 SYSTEM: WII, DS
- **SONIC & SEGA ALL-STARS RACING**
YEAR: 2010 SYSTEM: VARIOUS
- **SONIC FREE RIDERS**
YEAR: 2010 SYSTEM: XBOX 360
- **MARIO & SONIC AT THE LONDON 2012 OLYMPIC GAMES**
YEAR: 2011 SYSTEM: WII, DS
- **SONIC 4: EPISODE II**
YEAR: 2012 SYSTEM: VARIOUS
- **SONIC JUMP**
YEAR: 2012 SYSTEM: IOS, ANDROID
- **SONIC DASH**
YEAR: 2013 SYSTEM: IOS, ANDROID
- **MARIO & SONIC AT THE SOCHI 2014 OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES**
YEAR: 2013 SYSTEM: WII U, 3DS



GAME CHANGERS

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

Released: 1991 Publisher: Sega Developer: Sonic Team System: Mega Drive



There aren't as many secrets in *Sonic* as there are in *Mario*, but if you're prepared to experiment you will find them.

games™ examines the industry's most important videogames, looking at their influence and what made them so great in the first place. This month we take a look at *Sonic The Hedgehog*, Sega's answer to Mario

FLATTERY BY IMITATION is rife within the videogame industry, with one company often emulating the success of another to further its own success. By far one of the biggest examples is Sega's *Sonic The Hedgehog*; a franchise created to compete directly against Nintendo's *Mario* series.

Sega's Master System, while popular in Europe, had failed to make a big impact in the US or Japan, where it trailed massively behind Nintendo's NES. Sega already had a mascot by the name of Alex Kidd, and while he had starred in several popular games, he was no Mario. Wanting to rectify this, Sega had numerous developers submit character designs to its AM8 department and eventually settled on a creation by Naoto Oshima. It was a cute blue hedgehog who was then known as Mr Needlemouse. Created from a number of inspirations that ranged from the shoes of

Michael Jackson to the blue of Sega's corporate logo, Mr Needlemouse was given a spiky 'can do' attitude that would appeal more to Western gamers. He was then handed over to Yuji Naka, who worked in the five-man AM8 development team that would go on to become known as Sonic Team.

Work began on *Sonic The Hedgehog* in April 1990, with Yuji Naka on main programming duties. The small team worked for just over a year, with Sonic finally making his debut on 23 June 1991. *Sonic The Hedgehog* became an immediate success, and before long it had replaced *Altered Beast* as the Mega Drive's pack-in game of choice. The same thing happened on Sega's 8-bit console, with the Master System version (which was completely different to the Mega Drive offering) replacing *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* on the Master System II.



MAGIC MOMENTS

SONIC IS FULL OF MAGIC MOMENTS. IF WE WERE TO PICK JUST THREE, THOUGH, THESE ARE OUR FAVOURITES...



THAT INTRO

★ **FROM THE MOMENT** Sonic rushes across the screen and 'Sega' screams from your TV, the character's iconic status was secured. It's further reinforced by Sonic popping up and wagging his finger, just to show you how Nineties he is.



CHAOS QUEST

★ **REACH THE END** of Act 1 or 2 with 50 rings or more and you'll be transported to Sonic's Special Stage, an awesome level that must be completed in order to retrieve the Chaos Emerald found at the stage's centre.



THE NEED FOR SPEED

★ **THE SPEED OF *Sonic The Hedgehog*** remains one of its best mechanics. It makes even more of an impact when you pick up the relevant power-up and can speed through loops and across collapsible platforms like a hedgehog possessed.

■■■ WHILE THE MASTER System version is an incredibly slick platformer, it's arguably the Mega Drive outing that helped give Sega a much-needed edge over Nintendo. The speed of Sonic was absolutely blistering, making Mario look decidedly sluggish and old hat in comparison. Sonic was cool and spunky and had a much-desired attitude that Nintendo's plumber simply couldn't match. Of course it also helped that *Sonic* was an exceptionally fantastic platformer, and while it lacked the depth of *Super Mario World* (which had debuted some seven months earlier) it was quite clear that there was nothing else like *Sonic* on any other system.

Even if you ignored the breakneck pace at which Sonic ran, there was no denying that it was an aesthetic delight. The abstract designs of Sonic's different worlds (known as zones) further set it apart from the generic-looking environments of many other platformers of the time. Green Hill Zone was full of sharp-edged trees and chequerboard hills, Labyrinth Zone had a distinctly Aztec styling to it, while Star Light Zone offered sparkling backdrops and huge loops to negotiate. Each and every one of Sonic's six main zones (split into acts) were full of detail and featured bright primary colours that perfectly complemented the high speed action that Sonic Team's game offered.

SONIC HAD AN ATTITUDE THAT MARIO SIMPLY COULDN'T MATCH

KEY FACTS

■ Reach the end of an Act with 50 rings or more and Sonic gets the chance to collect a precious Chaos Emerald. Collecting all emeralds unlocks a different ending.

■ The Master System version has a different story to the Mega Drive game, as it's set afterwards. It still features Dr Robotnik, but many of the zones are completely different in design.

■ Such was the success of the Mega Drive pack-in that it enabled Sega to overtake Nintendo's market share for the first time in six years. In 1991 Sega counted for 65 per cent of the console market.

And yet there was more to Sonic than simply moving as fast as possible. While some would later go on to complain that the game was simply about 'pressing right and jumping at the right moment', the level design proved to be as every bit as memorable as *Sonic's* glorious visuals. Although the levels lacked the sheer depth and variety that *Mario* games offered, they still proved a joy to navigate. Let Sonic explore his environments instead of simply racing through them and you soon discover all sorts of delightful secrets tucked away that would lead to rings and various power-ups.

The rings were also a key aspect of *Sonic's* appeal, being a way of earning extra lives or acting as a useful shield. Whenever Sonic hit an enemy he would drop rings if he was carrying them, allowing him to quickly recover any before they disappeared completely. Hit an enemy without them, however, and he's robbed of a life. It's a neat mechanic that still holds up brilliantly today and remains a key component of practically every *Sonic* game since.

Equally memorable was Sonic's nemesis, Dr Robotnik, who would attack Sonic at the end of each final zone with all kinds of crazy contraptions, only to flee in terror when he was finally bested. As Bowser was for Mario, Dr Robotnik proved to be the perfect foil for Sega's new mascot and has hassled him ever since, gaining even more outlandish machines as console technology has continued to grow in power.

With *Sonic The Hedgehog*, Sonic Team created an unforgettable platformer that built on the DNA of past games but left its own distinct blueprint for others to follow. Even now, some 22 years after its original release, numerous digital releases ensure that a new generation of gamers are still able to experience that 16-bit magic.

SCORE
TIME
RINGS

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10

WHY I



Sonic The Hedgehog

ADAM 'ATOMIC' SALTSMAN,
CREATOR OF CANABALT

“It is impossible for me to untangle Sega’s first Sonic game from growing up, my imagination, what I think about games now, and just pure happiness. At the time it was a technical marvel, and it remains a work of considerable audio-visual beauty, an anti-Mario in only the very best ways. Marvelling over Sonic’s design, even as a middle school student, inspired me to fill reams of notebooks with imagined level designs and character designs, all the things that I do as my full-time job now. Sonic directly contributed to the existence of Canabalt too, of course, which had an enormous impact on my life. That cartridge wasn’t my first love, nor my greatest love, but the craftsmanship and artistry it represents, and the influence it has had over me as a designer, the way it serves as a reference or point of comparison for so much of what I love about videogames, all these things put it on a special pedestal for me. So thanks, Sonic.”



SONIC
X Z



“Sonic’s design inspired me to fill reams of notebooks with imagined level designs and character designs”

**ADAM ‘ATOMIC’ SALTSMAN,
CREATOR OF CANABALT**

GENERATION GAMES

Sonic Generations may be the cleverest, most reverential, anniversary celebration to be created for a videogame hero. We take a look at Sonic Team's latest and compare it to the classics it remixes and references



THE BEST *SONIC* games, you could say, play like a rollercoaster ride, with lots of ups and downs, and periods of anticipation followed by a bit that makes you go 'wheeee!' Sadly, the same can also be said of the hedgehog's videogame track record as a whole. For every height scaled there's an equal and opposite low. No other game character has experienced such wide gulfs in quality. Which makes the prospect of a playable anniversary game so interesting. Developed to celebrate 20 years since the launch of *Sonic The Hedgehog*, *Sonic Generations* hopes to represent and remix all of the best bits from Sega's flagship series while also shedding the worst. Can it succeed? We won't know until next issue, but an early look at the final game has demonstrated to us at least that there's a wealth of clever nostalgic content on the disc. Here, we take a look at most of the levels present in *Sonic Generations*, show how they compare to the originals and investigate some of the clever tweaks and changes that Sonic Team has made in this much anticipated 2D/3D hybrid.

GREEN HILL ZONE

From: *Sonic The Hedgehog*

THE MOST iconic stage in *Sonic* history, if you don't have fond memories of Green Hill Zone then you simply don't have fond memories of *Sonic*. Such is the importance of this classic stage that it's the only one to feature in both the console versions of *Sonic Generations* and the 3DS edition. In 2D, and on consoles, this is pretty much an HD tribute to the original game, and should do a lot to placate those who found *Sonic The Hedgehog 4: Episode I* underwhelming. Having said that, this isn't a carbon copy. There are multiple routes throughout the stages, the shortest of which require the most skill to traverse, which should make time trials a real challenge. In 3D, you get to see Green Hill Zone in ways you've never seen it before, as Sonic dissects the level, jumping through the middle of a loop-the-loop rather than running around it. The high point of the stage is actually a clever throwback to the whale in *Sonic Adventure*, except you're chased by a giant version of the Badnik piranha from *Sonic The Hedgehog*.



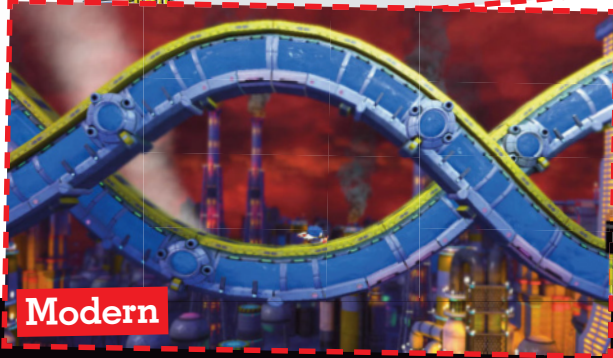
Retro



Modern



Retro



Modern

CHEMICAL PLANT ZONE

From: *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*

■■■■ THIS MEMORABLE *Sonic 2* stage features an almost identical layout to the original in 2D, save for a few visual flourishes and the way Sonic is able to run across the surface of the water if he's built up enough speed. Lose momentum and he'll sink to the bottom, which, in a nice touch, muffles the background music whenever you're underwater. Playing through in 3D shows off this familiar location from a refreshing perspective, and running under and through the criss-crossing chemical pipelines provokes a certain giddy rush for those who grew up with the original.

CASINO NIGHT ZONE

From: *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*

■■■■ AN EXCLUSIVE 3DS level, Casino Night Zone resurrects yet another extremely popular stage from the early years of *Sonic*. All of the unique gameplay elements of the stage are still present and correct, including the pinball flippers, plungers and slots, but Sonic Team has also taken the opportunity to add new elements to the 3D version of the stage, including a roulette wheel that sees Sonic curl up into a ball and spin until he lands on a certain number. Having not tried the 3DS game, we don't know what happens at that stage but we'd bet everything we have that it involves gold rings and extra lives.



Retro



Modern

MUSHROOM HILL

From: *Sonic & Knuckles*

■■■■ ANOTHER 3DS-exclusive stage, this one is the opening level from Mega Drive's *Sonic & Knuckles* and a hugely underrated part of *Sonic* history. Bouncing on spongy mushroom platforms was great fun, as were many of the new elements added to the series in this stage, such as pulley-operated lifts, corkscrew loops and weighted see-saw springs. All of these feature in the remade level. Additions and changes seem to be minimal but, as with all of the 3DS stages, the standout feature of the level is the ability to jump between foreground and background planes – which is sure to look excellent with the 3D Slider pushed all the way to the top.



Retro



Modern



SKY SANCTUARY

From: *Sonic & Knuckles*

AS ONE OF the later levels from *Sonic & Knuckles*, Sky Sanctuary is less well known than Mushroom Hill, but those who do remember it will know just how good this stage can be. In 3D this stage puts great emphasis on multiple routes, and we're certain it will be one of the most replayable levels as a result, thanks to the vast number of secrets to find. In 2D the stage pulls off some nice tricks too, such as a huge rotating circular platform that features power-up TV sets that move in and out of Sonic's horizontal axis as the platform spins under his feet. And, like *Generations'* Green Hill Zone, Sky Sanctuary mixes in elements from other *Sonic* games, in this case a floating platform you can move around by running on the spot, a lot like those seen in *Sonic 3's* Marble Garden.



Retro



Modern

SPEED HIGHWAY

From: *Sonic Adventure*

ONE OF THE better stages from *Sonic's* three-dimensional debut, Speed Highway starts off similarly to that of the Dreamcast original but eventually adds a layer of complexity, with some more dynamic moments that we assume weren't technically possible on Dreamcast. This is also the first level in *Generations* where you're given the opportunity to see a classic 3D stage made 2D. In this case, you wind up running right through the middle of the office block skyscrapers, churning desks and chairs around and smashing through glass windows. At first it feels weird to play a *Sonic Adventure* stage in 2D, but then you quickly realise that this could be one of *Sonic Generations'* most unsung selling points, as the next stage proves...



Retro



Modern

CITY ESCAPE

From: *Sonic Adventure 2*

IF *SONIC ADVENTURE 2* is the best 3D *Sonic* game (which, we'd assert, it is) then City Escape is the best 3D *Sonic* stage there has ever been. Surfing down the concrete slopes of San Francisco was an iconic moment on Dreamcast, and it's made even better here thanks to the way Sonic Team has remixed the level's climactic truck chase sequence. What was once a pulse-quickenning set-piece, reminiscent of *Sonic Adventure's* whale pursuit, has now been expanded into a full-on boss battle. The truck doesn't just chase Sonic down a hill; it tries to kill him with a series of saw blades

protruding from mechanical arms, and even keeps up with our hero by driving on its side along a wall. In 2D, the truck predictably follows Sonic from the side. There's no snowboard in this setting, but Sonic can collect a little skateboard power-up from the TV sets around the level. Later, the truck disappears off into the background, firing enemies out from its cargo. The truck takes on the role of a sort of recurring villain in this stage, constantly reappearing to threaten Sonic. At one point, it watches menacingly from a clifftop before jumping into the foreground and plummeting straight down into Sonic, Kamikaze-style, and at the climax of the stage the tenacious truck drives around the bottom of the screen, taking out chunks of the scaffolding that you're trying to climb. The whole stage proves just how well 3D levels can be re-imagined in 2D and is without doubt the highlight of the *Sonic Generations* content we've played to date. The fact that the original game's cheesy rock anthem, *Escape From The City*, features throughout is the icing on the cake.



Retro



Modern



Retro

SEASIDE HILL

From: *Sonic Heroes*

■■■■ *SONIC GENERATIONS'* levels are structured into three thematic eras: Mega Drive, Dreamcast and Modern. Curiously, the *Sonic Heroes* stage has been lumped into the 'Dreamcast era', along with the two *Sonic Adventure* games, despite the fact that it never appeared on Dreamcast; it was the first 3D *Sonic* game to be made for PS2 and GameCube following Sega's move to third-party development. Does its grouping here suggest that *Sonic Heroes* was originally created for Dreamcast? Maybe something in the game will reveal the truth... but it's more likely just a lazy way to divide up the stages.

Sadly, we haven't currently had a chance to play Seaside Hill, but its visual design certainly looks faithful to the original, though we'd expect the level structure to change somewhat, given the fact that the original game was designed for *Sonic Heroes'* simultaneous use of three different characters. In 2D, the biggest change seems to be the addition of underwater sections that appear to work much like those in the Mega Drive games.



Modern



Retro

ROOFTOP RUN

From: *Sonic Unleashed*

■■■■ THE INCLUSION OF a *Sonic Unleashed* stage in *Sonic Generations* is a bit of a weird choice, and not just because *Unleashed* is one of the most universally despised of all *Sonic* games. One of the few good points about the 2008 release was its daytime stages, which presented, for the first time in the series, levels that blended 3D and 2D design. Which, we suspect, will remove much of the novelty of *Sonic Generations'* USP. We already know what Rooftop Run looks and plays like in both styles, after all. Still, at least we won't have to put up with the Werehog this time. We hope...



Modern



Retro

PLANET WISP

From: *Sonic Colours*

■■■■ AS ONE OF the most popular and critically acclaimed of the modern *Sonic* games, it's hardly surprising to see *Sonic Colours* represented here, though the relatively recent release of the Wii original sadly means that there won't be much nostalgia to this level unless Sonic Team manages to weave in some clever references to other games. For now, the most interesting thing about Planet Wisp is that it offers us a chance to see a popular Wii stage rendered with much more processing power and represented in high definition.



Modern





Behind The Scenes

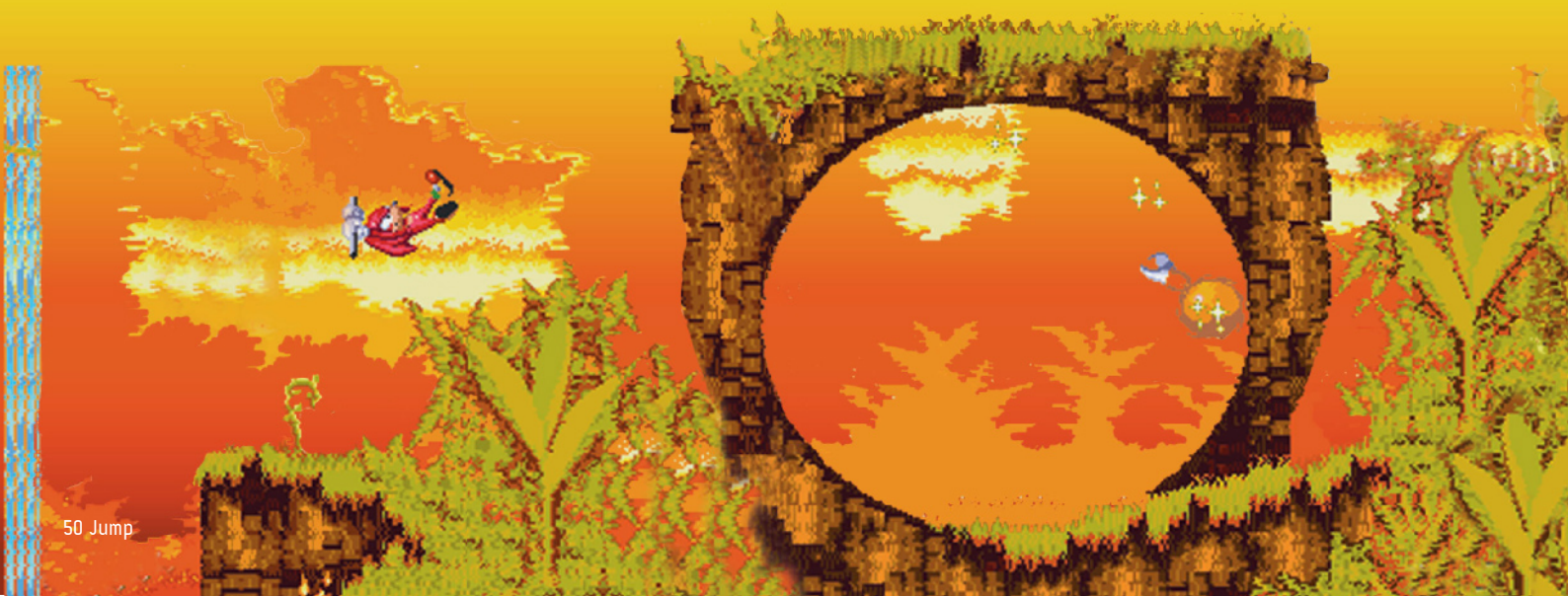
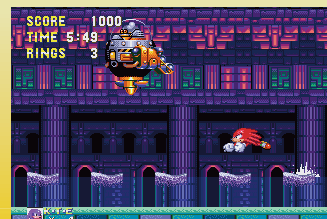
Release: 1994
Format: Mega Drive
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sega Technical Institute
Key Staff: Yuji Naka (producer, lead programmer), Hirokazu Yasuhara (director, lead designer), Roger Hector (project manager), Takashi Iizuka (senior designer)

IT'S OFTEN CITED AS ONE OF THE GREATEST SONIC GAMES OF ALL TIME BUT FEW WILL HAVE ACTUALLY EXPERIENCED IT UNLESS THEY OWNED BOTH SONIC 3 AND SONIC & KNUCKLES. THAT GAME IS SONIC 3 & KNUCKLES. ROGER HECTOR, THE ONLY AMERICAN ON THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM, REVEALS HOW THE INDUSTRY'S FIRST AND ONLY 'LOCK ON' GAME CAME TO BE...

The Sega Technical Institute is something of a phenomenon in retro game industry. Originally founded in 1991 and long since disbanded, STI was made up of staff from Sega of America and Sega Japan in equal measure with the intention that each nationality could learn from the other's experience to create the world's best games. For a time, this plan worked exceptionally well, with *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* being the most noteworthy triumph of the studio's early days. But such projects had been burdened by communication issues and

cultural differences, while rumours persisted that Yuji Naka was growing increasingly protective of the Sonic brand. Whether these rumours were the reason for division within STI, or the cause of it, is unknown but the Technical Institute nevertheless soon found itself split down the middle with the American staff working on original projects while the Japanese continued development of the Sonic series. This was the situation under which *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* began development, yet despite Naka working with a handpicked team, with full control over his own project, production was far from painless.

As the general manager of the Sega Technical Institute, Roger Hector is one of only a few English-speaking individuals to have had first-hand experience of the development of *Sonic 3*. "My job was to interface between the Sonic team and the rest of the company," Hector explains. "I had to keep the rest of the company from interfering with or bothering the team, and I had to keep the team on track. I had to make sure they had what they needed, and if they had problems, I had to solve them. This included everything from scheduling and resources to giving creative input to resolving personal disputes.



Sometimes I had to bring in outside contractors to help, other times I had to lock the doors to keep well-meaning but distracting people out."

With such an important role within the company, it was imperative for Hector to communicate effectively with the staff in Japan. "Most of the Japanese spoke some English. The ones that were more fluent did translation for the others," Hector reveals. "There were some additional Sega of Japan management staff that came in and helped with communications at big meetings. We also brought in an outside language teacher and conducted a regular Berlitz class in Japanese." While Hector's role within the production of *Sonic 3* may seem relatively perfunctory at first glance, the troubled development ahead would see his ability to manage people and resources while maintaining relationships with external companies become invaluable to the development team.

Following an initial experimental phase, in which an isometric version of *Sonic 3* was prototyped and scrapped in favour of a more



There were a lot of ideas that had been brainstormed up, but had not been used in *Sonic 2*. In addition, many more ideas started to pour out during the creative process... and once this gets started, it takes on a life of its own. These were very creative people, and there was no shortage of ideas."

Those ideas were so plentiful, in fact, that it soon became quite apparent to Hector that *Sonic 3* – in

think, that it would make more sense to split it into two games."

The first would be released as *Sonic 3* in February 1994 while the second part, now known as *Sonic & Knuckles*, would follow in October of the same year. The decision was a logical one, and probably not all that uncommon in the game industry, but it was the form that the dissected game would eventually take that would make this such an unusual project. Rather than release each game as a separate entity, completely unrelated from one another, the development team decided to create the ability to allow both cartridges to physically join together in order to make a third game that combined the best elements of each.

By wiring a cartridge connector into the top of the *Sonic & Knuckles* cartridge, the STI delivered a method that would allow users to plug their *Sonic 3* cart into the top, which would then merge the assets

BETWEEN THE ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

The delays involved in the development of *Sonic & Knuckles* put even more pressure than normal on Sega Technical Institute as Sega had arranged for the game to be launched live on MTV, from Alcatraz Island. The deadline for which could simply not be missed. The game was finished on time of course, but as Roger Hector explains, not even a large MTV broadcast could completely avoid STI's run of bad luck. "Hundreds of people were brought in by boat, and film crews and dozens of players flown in from all around the world. Many game stations had been set up inside the old prison, and the players furiously competed for a big cash prize on live TV. But it turned out that the US Navy's Blue Angels precision jet team were performing that day over the bay, and they were using Alcatraz Island as the centre point of their show. We were putting on a show for MTV and were being buzzed by real fighter jets at the same time. It was wild."



▲ The MTV special included a visit to STI and an interview with Roger Hector.

"IT WAS DECIDED THAT IT WOULD MAKE MORE SENSE TO SPLIT IT INTO TWO GAMES" ROGER HECTOR

traditional platform game, the STI began work on its most ambitious Sonic title to date. "The company wanted a high-quality Sonic game to sell that would build on its already strong reputation," says Hector. "The team wanted to expand the story with new characters and new gameplay,

its proposed form – was simply unachievable. "There were so many creative ideas that it would take too much time to develop such a massive project. The team brainstormed up two games' worth of material initially and it was decided, before the Alpha stage I





of each title to create *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* – the game that *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* was originally intended to be before the split. “I was surprised at the relative ease with which this was done,” comments Hector. “It was a tricky technical piece of work, but these guys were some of the best in the industry and it came off pretty smoothly.”

The resultant games were both instantly familiar and different from previous Sonic games. *Sonic 3* boasted levels that were three times larger than those in *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, and contained multiple routes that were only accessible by either Sonic or Tails in conjunction with their own unique abilities or

play differed from Sonic. As well as being able to glide and make use of a force field power up, Knuckles also played through a completely different set of levels, meaning that the game could be played through twice, with major differences depending which character was used.

With both cartridges locked together, *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* was unlocked, offering a completely new experience that differed from its component parts. The new game primarily allowed Knuckles to play through *Sonic 3*, with new sections and bosses added exclusively to his run through the game, followed directly by the levels from *Sonic & Knuckles*. There were other



“MICHAEL JACKSON WAS A VERY BIG FAN OF SONIC AND HE WANTED TO RECORD A SOUNDTRACK FOR THE GAME” ROGER HECTOR

by using the new environmental elements such as trapezes.

Sonic 3 was also the moment when the story began to take a more important role in the series. Knuckles, an echidna that actually bore little resemblance to the long-beaked animal, was introduced as a non-player character while cut-scenes were used between each zone to explain the changes in location. *Sonic & Knuckles* made further radical changes. As the title suggests, Tails was dropped as a playable character and replaced with Knuckles, whose

differences too; Tails could be used to play through the *Sonic & Knuckles* levels while star posts would unlock one of three bonus games from either *Sonic 3* or *Sonic & Knuckles*. Even more content could also be unlocked by plugging other Sonic games into the *Sonic & Knuckles* cart (see *Locked And Loaded*).

Sonic 3 and *Sonic & Knuckles* sold around 4 million copies collectively, but we can only guess at how many people owned both copies, allowing them to play *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* as it was intended. Nevertheless, those

who have been able to sample the game’s delights generally remember it, alongside *Sonic CD* and *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, as one of the best 2D Sonic games ever made. Roger Hector’s memories, meanwhile, although dominated by a feeling of pride for the game, reveal further troubles as the *Sonic 3* project neared the end of its development.

“It was a process that was full of highs and lows,” Hector explains. “Everyone involved knew how much was riding on these games and we had to live up to



▲ *Sonic 3*’s bonus levels weren’t as impressive as *Sonic 2* but made a change from the main game.

extremely high expectations. The most difficult thing was to keep the balance, supporting the creative and technical needs of the team, and the business demands of a critical Christmas release schedule. Sonic Team was largely self-motivated and Naka’s personal drive was a key to success. But there was

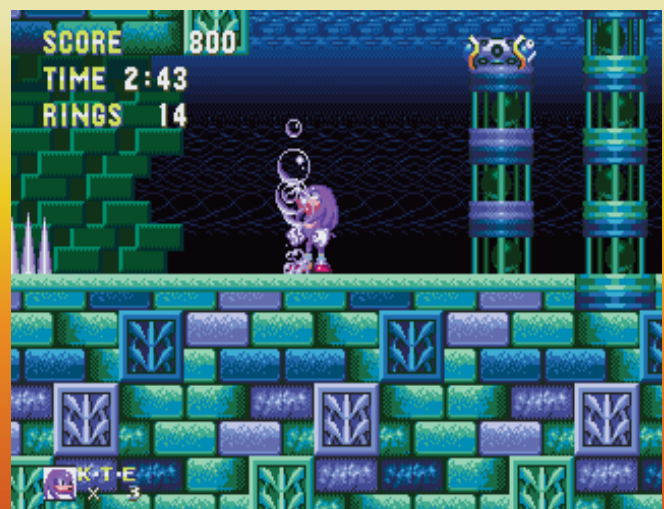
Locked and Loaded

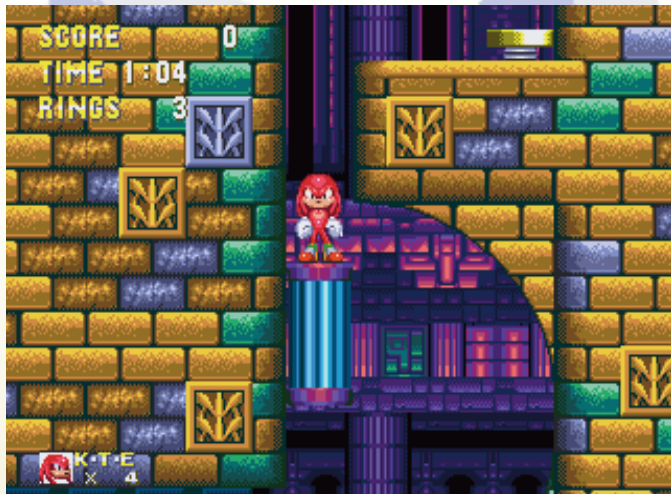


Sonic 3 & Knuckles wasn’t the only game that could be unlocked using the *Sonic & Knuckles* cartridge as curious, cartridge-wealthy gamers found out in 1994 when they predictably tried every single one of their Mega Drive games with the Lock-On system. Plug any Mega Drive cartridge into the top and one of over a hundred million

variations of *Sonic 3*’s mini-game will be playable. Stick in the original *Sonic The Hedgehog*, meanwhile, and it’s possible to play all of those variations. Best of all, if the player inserts *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, new game *Knuckles The Echidna In Sonic The Hedgehog 2* is unlocked. This was essentially the same as *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* but with Knuckles as a playable character and some new items placed in unusually high places in order to take advantage of his gliding and climbing abilities. That STI managed to introduce such changes into a game that was never designed to link up to *Sonic & Knuckles* in the first place is perhaps an even greater achievement than *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* itself.

▲ *Sonic*’s underwater levels. Did anyone actually enjoy playing through these?





also creative burn out, personal squabbles, unrealistic schedules, misunderstandings and technical problems... the works. As you can imagine, any time you bring together many different creative people to work on one thing, there will be disagreements about what goes in and what goes out of the game. Naka was a strong team leader – and a good one in my view because he listened to his team as individuals – but he made clear decisions and moved on. This did not always make him popular, but that was okay. Most of the STI staff understood the importance of clear decision making but that didn't help if it was your pet idea that was shot down. This just comes with the territory. It was Naka's clear responsibility to direct the development of the game, and he didn't have a lot of time to waste arguing.

So he was sometimes seen as being harsh, but this was not really true. I have a great deal of respect for what he did and how he did it. The results stand for themselves." For all Hector's empathy for Yuji Naka, however, those

feelings weren't always shared with those lower-level staff who were less experienced in management. "Some talented members of STI who were not on Naka's team were a little bit jealous of the attention and high priority given to *Sonic 3*," Hector continues, "but this also comes with the territory and I can remember spending time counselling and encouraging them. Clearly not every game can have the built-in artistic and commercial anticipation of a *Sonic 3*, and I sometimes had to shift resources toward higher priority projects like *Sonic*. But keeping people motivated to do their best, even when their project is being raided for staff is a built-in dilemma at a place like STI and was a constant balancing act."

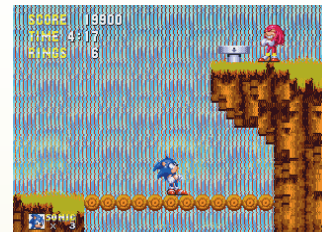
Despite such internal squabbles, *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* turned out to be one of the highlights of STI's career, up there with the likes of *Comix Zone* and *Die Hard Arcade*, and Hector remains incredibly proud of the team's achievements. "After putting in all the hours and sweat managing this process, it was tremendously rewarding to get it done great and

on time. We were all very happy with the game itself, though we barely made its release date. In the game business this is the Holy Grail.

The people at STI were truly some of the best in the business, which means they were difficult and extremely demanding but they were dedicated and could deliver. It was very rewarding to work with such talent. I also loved to meet the Sonic fans. There were so many of them, and they loved the game. It was pure fun for me to meet them and play the game with them. I am a pretty good player you know – well I used to be, anyway."

As with any project there's always something the creators wish they could have changed, or something interesting that had to be dropped from the final release. *Sonic 3* is no exception as Hector explains with an unexpected revelation. "Michael Jackson was a very big fan of Sonic and he wanted to record a soundtrack for the game," he reveals. "He came to STI and met with the team to discuss the design theme, story, and feel of the game. He then went away and recorded an entire soundtrack that covered all of the worlds. It was fantastic.

The music fitted perfectly for the game, and they had a distinctive 'Michael Jackson' sound. We had it all ready and integrated into the game when the first news stories came out accusing him of child molestation, and Sega had to back away from this collaboration. It was very late in the development process, and we had to quickly put together a complete replacement music track. Howard Drossin, STI's music guy, stepped in and did a great job, working around the clock to get it done. Despite the unexpected complications so late in the game, we were very happy with the final results. It was too bad nobody outside ever heard the Michael Jackson music."



▲ Tails' replacement, the dreadlocked Knuckles, facing off against Sonic.





SONIC TEAM PLAYER

As Sonic The Hedgehog gets back on track with two new solo adventures, we meet Takashi Iizuka, the ex-head of Sega Studios USA, lead designer of the NiGHTS series and the man charged with filling the void left by Sonic Team Japan's long-since-departed founding members

Curiously, for a company with the word 'team' in its name, Sega's Sonic Team is principally known for the input of a single man, Mr Yuji Naka. As the creator of *Sonic The Hedgehog*, lead programmer on the first *Phantasy Star*, and the producer behind a string of golden-era Sega games from *ChuChu Rocket!* to *Samba De Amiga*, Naka's sparkling reputation is thoroughly deserved. But, of course, he hasn't actually been part of Sonic Team for many years, having left Sega in 2006 to form Prope.

Naka's shoes are two of the most difficult to fill in the entire industry, but the unenviable task of doing so falls to Takashi Iizuka – and we can think of few people better suited to the task. The 19-year Sega veteran was heavily involved in the design of many of the best *Sonic* titles, was instrumental to the creation of the universally loved *NiGHTS Into Dreams*, and is currently overseeing Sonic's return to classic platforming values with *Sonic The Hedgehog 4* and *Sonic Colours*. It was

during a demonstration of the latter that we got the chance to catch up with Iizuka and take a high-speed, loop-the-loop trip down memory lane.

Iizuka joined Sega as a fresh-faced college graduate in the summer of 1991, but unlike so many aspiring designers today, he didn't have a qualification directly related to videogames. "My education was more on the science and technology side and, in general, people from that background would go to work in the electronics industry," he tells us. "But I didn't want to take that route. I wanted to work in an industry that was more in the entertainment business, something that provided fun and enjoyable things for the consumer. That's when I came across Sega. I didn't really have games in mind, but I joined Sega because, at the time, they were already a well known company in the arcade and consumer gaming business, and they also had a toy division, so they felt like the right place to be."



In the weeks before starting work, Iizuka bought, played and loved the recently released *Sonic The Hedgehog*, so he must have been delighted when his new employer placed him on the quality assurance team for the sequel. "It was there that I realised I wanted to be involved in the *Sonic* franchise for the future, and when I heard that Sega was about to make *Sonic 3*, that's when I was invited to become a member of the development team."

There was just one catch. Following the completion of *Sonic The Hedgehog*, Yuji Naka had relocated the core development team to the U.S.A., where they would collaborate with American and British designers in an experimental international studio called the Sega Technical Institute. If Iizuka wanted to be involved in the creation of *Sonic 3*, he'd have to leave Tokyo for the hills of San Francisco. "That was actually the first time I had been to America, so it was full of surprises for me as a person. In developing the game, I worked alongside

American people. There were so many differences between us culturally, but what I learned from them was that *Sonic* was actually a game that appealed to a global audience. So it made sense to develop it with a global team."

Iizuka joined the *Sonic 3* team as senior game designer, a job that should have been fairly straightforward given that the two previous titles had already honed the lightning-fast platform game formula to perfection. But the *Sonic 3* project was anything but straightforward. The unexpected departure of guest composer Michael Jackson saw the soundtrack completely re-written at the last minute, while Sonic Team's swelling ambitions caused the game to become so large that it had to be split into two parts, the second taking the form of *Sonic & Knuckles*, whose 'Lock-On' cartridge enabled the two separate games to be plugged together, to form one epic

adventure that would end Sonic's Mega Drive years on a high note.

We posit that it must have been a grueling introduction to the world of game development, but Iizuka humbly shrugs off such suggestions. "At that time I wasn't really conscious of the fact that it was such a big project, but when you look back it was very ambitious. The Lock-On technology in *Sonic & Knuckles* was something very new, and when I look back and think that I was working on something so new as my first project, it's clear that this was a very valuable experience in my career."

If Iizuka learned the value of creating something new during the development of *Sonic 3*, then that virtue would come to define his next big project – startlingly original Saturn classic *NIGHTS Into Dreams*, the first Sonic Team game not to feature Sonic himself. "When you look back at those early days, Sonic grew up with the Mega Drive and the Mega Drive grew up



Going Home



■ Yuji Naka's departure from Sonic Team in 2006 had a huge effect on both the studio and the lives of individual developers, as Iizuka explains. "At that time, Naka-san was looking after the Japanese side of Sonic Team and I was running the American office. When Naka-san left the company, it occurred to me that we should unite the teams and build them up as one rather than continue to spread them in separate directions. So that's when we moved the team back to Japan. At the time I was quite sad because I loved living in America. Today, however, I'm really happy. I love working at the modern Sonic Team and love the fact that we can make games like *Sonic Colours* and *Sonic The Hedgehog 4* together."

with Sonic," he says. "They were symbiotic. And, in introducing the Saturn, Yuji Naka tried to create the same kind of relationship between that hardware and its software. He didn't think it would have been innovative enough to merely do *Sonic* again, so we decided to put the *Sonic* series on hold for a while, and that's when we came up with the character of *NIGHTS*."

"Sonic was a character who ran along the ground, but with *NIGHTS* we wanted to do something new so we came up with the opposite idea. Instead of running, *NIGHTS* would fly freely through the air. And while the team had a lot of experience on the *Sonic* series, all these rules and ideas that they had established became completely irrelevant. The ground effectively no longer existed and the obstacles were quite different. We had to rethink how to make an action game. It was very difficult and we went through a lot of trial and error."

All of that trial and error was worth it, of course. Though *NIGHTS* flew under the radar of a wider gaming public more enchanted by Lara Croft or Mario than anything their Saturn-owning friends had, those who did play it instantly fell in love. The beauty of its presentation and the fluid, acrobatic gameplay marked *NIGHTS Into Dreams* as the Saturn's killer app, and redefined

Sonic Team as the master of brave, original IP. But that originality came at a cost. As Sonic Team moved on to other projects – like the criminally underrated *Burning Rangers* – it also alienated Sega's mainstream consumers, as an entire hardware generation passed without the appearance of a proper *Sonic* game.

So, as the Tokyo division of Sonic Team continued to innovate, setting to work on rhythm-action classic *Samba De Amigo* and MMO trailblazer *Phantasy Star Online* under the guiding hand of Yuji Naka, Iizuka led the San Francisco office in the development of their ambitious Dreamcast launch title, *Sonic Adventure*.

"As there were no *Sonic* games on Saturn, the gap between the Mega Drive games and *Sonic Adventure* was a very long time, so I felt a huge weight of expectation from the fans.

Internally at Sega, *Sonic Adventure* was a huge project for the company and just kept increasing in size, so the pressure was immense and grew by the day. But once we got to a certain point in development when everyone could see the game coming together and the development team gained confidence, Sega management were really able to visualise what we were working toward and the pressure started to ease off."



■ Iizuka was aware of the expanding cast of characters as early as *Sonic 3*. "Adding those characters," he explains, "was necessary in order to expand the world of *Sonic* and turn it into a much bigger franchise. Sonic was becoming bigger and as well-known as someone like Mickey Mouse."





“Sonic was becoming bigger and as well-known as someone like Mickey Mouse”



■ The inclusion of insipid child platform sections spoiled *Journey Of Dreams*, the long requested but ultimately disappointing sequel to *NIGHTS*.

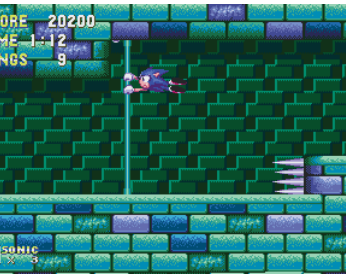
However, translating the *Sonic The Hedgehog* experience into 3D was no easy task. “Even Sonic Team had never seen a 3D *Sonic* game at that time. I had a vision of what a 3D *Sonic* would look like, I could see it in my mind, but none of the other team members could imagine it. So my main difficulty was educating the team on what exactly the game would be. In the previous *Sonic* games, he could only ever go forward or backward, but in a 3D game he could travel in all directions and we felt like we had to make use of that space. Platforming was still what made a *Sonic* game a *Sonic* game, but we now had this new dimension to play with and we had to think how we could make the best use of it. And that’s where we came up with the adventure parts, giving the player an element of discovery in addition to the platforming.”

Sonic *Adventure*, while not quite as successful a 3D transition as *Super Mario 64*, was a hugely popular Dreamcast launch title, followed by an equally popular sequel that Iizuka tells us is one

of his personal favourites of the series. The designer is clearly very proud of his work, but memories of this time are also anchored by sadness due to the premature discontinuation of the Dreamcast in 2001, and Sega’s transformation from platform holder to third-party developer. As Iizuka tells us exactly what the Dreamcast meant to him, we decide not to push the issue too hard. The man is visibly upset just from thinking about it.

“*Sonic Adventure* was the launch title for Dreamcast, and that meant that we were developing the game in conjunction with the console itself,” he explains. “We were able to make a number of requests to the hardware team. For example, to make the game as good as possible we had to request that even more RAM be added to the Dreamcast. There was a lot of discussion between the hardware and software teams, and because the Dreamcast was brought to life alongside *Sonic Adventure* it feels to me that the two are intrinsically attached to each other. I have a lot of special emotions toward the Dreamcast and I still





believe that it's a very good piece of hardware, and because I was technically involved in its production I have nothing but warm feelings when I look back at it."

Every cloud has a silver lining, however, and as Sega closed its doors on an historic era it opened brand new ones into the world of multi-format game development. "Well, obviously the fact that Sega no longer had its own console, that was a very sad thing for me, but it also presented us with an opportunity to present our games to people who had never played a *Sonic* game before purely because they never owned a Sega console. *Sonic Heroes* was the first multiplatform title I put together, and I had very mixed emotions when creating it. We were no longer working on Sega hardware, but we were aiming at a wider audience."

That wider audience, split between GameCube, PlayStation 2 and Xbox, represented a divergence of tastes somewhat alien to the Sega crowd, and as Sonic

Team worked to please these newfound customers it also risked upsetting some of its most loyal fans. As was the case with the mostly unfortunate *Shadow The Hedgehog*, a *Sonic* spin-off that saw the black-spined anti-hero driving a 4x4 and wielding a handgun where only a pair of red sneakers and a spherical force-field once sufficed. As Iizuka explains, this darker and more violent entry in the *Sonic* series was created for an audience that seemed to be craving increasingly adolescent themes at the time.

As we'd gone multiplatform, there were many audiences who had no experience of the *Sonic* series. I was still living in America at the time, and there were a lot of shooter games that were very popular. So with *Shadow The Hedgehog* we wanted to aim the series at these gamers that loved shooting games." It's safe to say that platform gamers and first-

■ Though there was never a true *Sonic* game on Saturn, this bonus content in *Christmas NiGHTS* at least gave us a little taste of 3D *Sonic* a couple of years before Dreamcast's *Sonic Adventure*.



“I'd love to make a third *NiGHTS* game, but that decision will always be up to the management at Sega”

person shooter fans generally don't mix, at least if the reception to *Shadow The Hedgehog* is anything to by. Modest sales and a vicious critical reaction thankfully killed off any plans that Sonic Team had to turn the game into an ongoing series, and Iizuka turned his attention toward a much more family friendly project.

NiGHTS: Journey Of Dreams was a long requested sequel for Sonic Team and a follow-up to a game that is very close to Iizuka's heart, but it was one that sadly failed to live up to expectation. Though the equal of *NiGHTS Into Dreams* in many respects, *Journey Of Dreams* was dragged down – way down – by the inclusion of some clumsy traditional platform game sections that had no right to appear in a game that's supposed to be all about the joy of dream-like free-flight. When we last met Iizuka, he was on the



press circuit promoting *Journey Of Dreams*, and understandably had to champion it. Nearly three years on we wonder if he thinks differently. But if he does harbour any regrets, his answer makes a fine job of hiding them.

"With the Wii version of *NiGHTS* we were able to implement presentation that was not possible in the Sega Saturn days, so from that perspective the team's goal was fulfilled and we're really happy with what we achieved. I'd personally love to make a third *NiGHTS* game, but that decision will always be up to the management at Sega."

It's unlikely that we'll ever see another *NiGHTS* game again. After all, Sega is a very different company to the one that endlessly bankrolled creative and experimental projects and their sequels in the Saturn and Dreamcast eras, regardless of commercial performance. Sonic Team is once



■ Izuka's time spent living in San Francisco had an obvious influence on *Sonic Adventure 2*. The city's distinctive streets were used for the opening level of the 2001 Dreamcast game.



Other Teamsters

While Takashi Izuka has remained at Sonic Team for 19 years, many other important individuals have moved on from the legendary studio...



NAOTO OSHIMA

■ Arguably more important to Sonic Team than even Yuji Naka, Naoto Oshima designed the first two *Phantasy Star* games, created Sonic and Dr Eggman, and directed *Sonic CD* and *Burning Rangers*. Oshima left Sonic Team in 1999 to form Artoon where he used his flair for character design to create platform games like *Blinx: The Time Sweeper*, *Yoshi's Island DS* and *Pinobee*.



HIROKAZU YASUHARA

■ Founding member, Yasuhara directed the first four *Sonic* titles and continued to consult on Sega projects after leaving in the mid-Nineties. In 2002, he joined fellow Sega Technical Institute collaborator Mark Cerny at Naughty Dog, where he worked on *Uncharted*. Then in 2008 he joined another STI team-mate, Roger Hector, at Namco, where he is developing a *Pac-Man* title.



PETER MORAWIEC

■ Though not a true member of Sonic Team, Eastern Europe-born Morawiec was part of the Sega Technical Institute team that designed *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* and helped design the game's iconic half-pipe special stages. Morawiec went on to design *Sonic Spinball* and *Comix Zone* for STI before leaving to form Luxoflux where he and long-term collaborator Adrian Stephens created *Vigilante 8* and the *True Crime* series.



again working solely on *Sonic* titles, at least for the foreseeable future, but the days of 4x4s, hedgehog-human relationships and werewogs thankfully seem to be behind them. *Sonic The Hedgehog 4* is picking up where the Mega Drive left off, in a wholly 2D platform game that stars Sonic and Sonic alone, while *Sonic Colours* looks set to evolve the best bits from *Sonic Unleashed*, while washing away memories of the generally disliked – though not by **games™** – *Sonic And The Black Knight*.

"If you look at the other *Sonic* titles," says Izuka, "Sonic has always been a character focused on speed and speed alone. If we wanted to incorporate some other type of gameplay into our previous games then we had to introduce a new character who would give the game a different layer of action. With the newest *Sonic* games, we're going back to the fundamentals of having Sonic the only playable character, so the game should concentrate on the high-speed element. At the same time, however, we want to feature those different

layers of action, so that's why we came up with the Colour powers."

In *Sonic Colours*, collectible power-ups will momentarily change Sonic into a laser beam, a space rocket or a powerful drill before returning him to familiar form a few seconds later. Izuka's enthusiasm for the idea is obvious. "The Colour concept is one of my favourite features in the *Sonic* franchise, and I think the team should be really proud of it."

As for Sonic and Izuka's future, there's nothing like a new piece of hardware, and the fresh possibilities that come with it, to get the creative juices flowing. "At Sonic Team right now, some of the members are looking into how we can utilise the 3DS and possibly bring a *Sonic* title to the platform. From a development perspective, the glasses-free 3D visuals are very interesting. Nothing has materialised yet, but it's my hope that we'll see a *Sonic* title on 3DS at some point in the future."





BEHIND THE SCENES

SONIC ADVENTURE

Ten years after the release of Sonic Adventure, director Takashi Iizuka speaks to games™ about the making of the most pivotal game in Sonic Team's flagship series



Released: 1998

Format: Dreamcast

Also On: PC, GameCube

Publisher: Sega

Developer: Sonic Team

KEY STAFF:

Takashi Iizuka

(Director)

Yuji Naka

(Producer)

Kazuyuki Hoshino

(Art Director)

Tetsu Katano

(Lead Programmer)

Yuji Uekawa

(Character Designer)

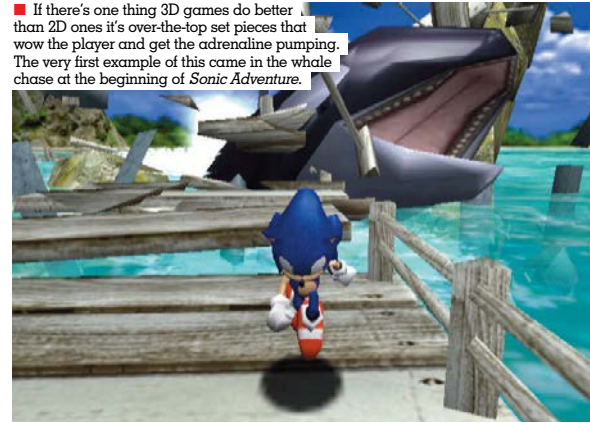
■ **SONIC THE HEDGEHOG** and the third dimension. It's a relationship that's never quite achieved perfection but has nevertheless fascinated gamers for over a decade. Where Sega's chief mascot was once considered Mario's equal, with the release of *Super Mario 64* the balance of power shifted as Nintendo created the mould for 3D platform games and Sega awkwardly shuffled its feet. The Saturn console came and went without a Sonic platform game; it was left to Dreamcast to realise Sonic's 3D debut. But what a debut. Visually superior to *Super Mario 64*, featuring character-based quests and blisteringly fast gameplay, it was classic Sonic and much more besides. And while the last decade of 3D Sonic games has been a mixed bag, the 1998 original remains the finest non-2D work to date.

The pioneering *Sonic Adventure* was directed by Takashi Iizuka, the man responsible for the level design of *NiGHTS Into Dreams*, who subsequently rose through the ranks of Sonic Team as Yuji Naka took to a more hands-off role. Tellingly, Iizuka pinpoints 1996 – the year of *Super Mario 64*, *Tomb Raider*, and *NiGHTS* – as the year he began work on what eventually became *Sonic Adventure*. "It all started when I mentioned that I wanted to create a Sonic action game where you could play and enjoy the story together," he recalls. "At that time Dreamcast didn't exist and we started to experiment on Sega Saturn. However, as soon as the console prototype was complete, we shifted to Dreamcast."

With the specifications of Sega's newest console still under discussion during *Sonic Adventure's* pre-production phase, Iizuka had to be careful not to make the game too ambitious but also found that the flagship title gave him some influence over hardware development. "We were working together when Dreamcast was still a prototype," Iizuka recalls, "and had to imagine what form the final **CONTINUED >**



■ If there's one thing 3D games do better than 2D ones it's over-the-top set pieces that wow the player and get the adrenaline pumping. The very first example of this came in the whale chase at the beginning of *Sonic Adventure*.



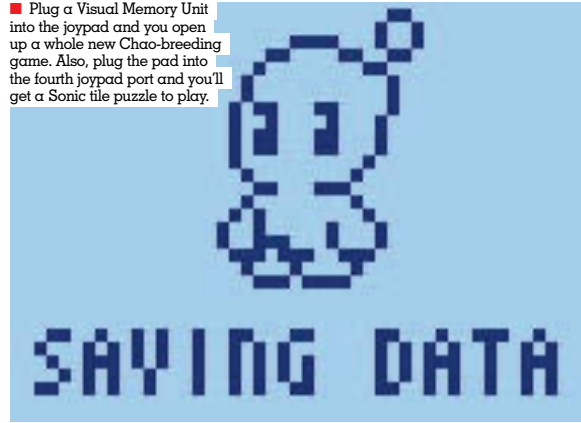
I WANTED TO CREATE A SONIC GAME WHERE YOU COULD PLAY AND ENJOY THE STORY



BEHIND THE SCENES SONIC ADVENTURE



■ Plug a Visual Memory Unit into the joypad and you open up a whole new Chao-breeding game. Also, plug the pad into the fourth joypad port and you'll get a Sonic tile puzzle to play.



■ The snowboarding level is one of the best remembered in Sonic history and made a brilliant comeback in the streets of San Francisco in *Sonic Adventure 2*.



FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:

CRAYMEN EDGE

▲ The bit where the killer whale is chasing. Destroying the jetty behind you was jaw-dropping the first time I saw it.

Posted by:

DELBOY84

▲ Easily the best of the 3D Sonic games. Made my jaw drop the first time I saw it in action as I was always more a Sonic than Mario kinda guy. Sadly the series has been declining ever since....

Posted by:

JAY-

▲ Brilliant game, not so brilliant QA. A few more months of development to iron out the bugs and people would discuss *Sonic Adventure* in the same way they talk about *Mario 64* I reckon. The set pieces were eye-popping for the time.

Posted by:

RAPIDMOLLUSC

▲ First game I bought for my import DC and loved it. Didn't understand a word of what was said, so the fact he spoke was irrelevant to me. Hell, I even had fun creating/breeding Chaos and racing them... after all, everyone wanted a little Black Devil one.

Posted by:

RIVAONI

▲ As with *Sonic Adventure 2*, loved Sonic's bits, couldn't stand the rest. Favourite level was the city one at night, can't remember its name, but I remember getting into a bit of a competition with a mate to try and get the best time on it.

Posted by:

SURLY

▲ I remember getting my Dreamcast around launch and a line my mum came out with on the day I first played it always seemed to stick with me: "Oh look, he leaves footprints in the sand." I'm telling you, that game was epic.



■ Sonic and Tails ride into the danger zone in one of *Sonic Adventure*'s best cut-scenes.



WHAT THEY SAID...



The sheer size of the game is awesome and you can find new things about each stage each time you play. There's so much to Sonic Adventure that you'll never get bored

Dreamcast Magazine, Issue 1



■ game would take, such as how many polygons we could use and how fast processing would be. Of course, there were times when we had to restart from scratch. However, with the hardware still in development I think it was a merit for the *Sonic Adventure* team as we could send requests to the hardware side. The analogue stick was developed as per our request from the software development side. In Sonic's 3D game, where things change dynamically, the analogue input was a requirement. The VMU, however, was a suggestion from the hardware development side. Although it was small, being able to carry a device with a monitor was an interesting idea so we used it for nurturing the Chao in *Sonic Adventure*."

Despite Sonic Team's late start, truly 3D games were still in their infancy around the mid- to late-Nineties and Iizuka was aware of the form's limitations. "At that time, 3D action games still had problems," he explains. "Regardless of the merit of being able to walk in 360 degrees, it had created a difficulty in gameplay as users did not know where to go. So, in *Sonic Adventure*, without losing where the destination is in 3D, we aimed to create an exhilarating game that would provide players with a sense of 2D action. The dynamic changes of the camera system were integral to this motive so we had a huge trial-and-error process to make them work."



TAKASHI IIZUKA
Director

Using these techniques, Sonic Team was able to transform the rollercoaster gameplay of Mega Drive Sonic into 3D quite successfully, yet Iizuka wanted *Sonic Adventure* to be more than just a pure platformer. "During the planning stage, we had been calling the game *Sonic RPG*. That's how much we had been aiming to make an action game where stories progress through adventures around the world." Sega didn't just want to create a sequel, it wanted to expand the Sonic universe, giving players the opportunity to explore the fictional world and get to know it in a way that was not possible in the 2D games. To realise such ambition, *Sonic Adventure* needed a landscape that players would want to explore and so Sonic Team set about creating a series of rich tropical environments for which it took inspiration from real-world locations.

"When we completed the original plan and story outline, six team members went to see the ancient ruins in Latin America," recalls Iizuka. "Travelling through countries such as Cancun in Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru we visited the famous Maya and Inca ruins. We did not have the internet at that time so we had almost no information about the locations. However, in order to create a 3D environment, we had to see them for real so we could make full use of them for 3D model textures. Of all the places we visited, the Tikal ruin in Guatemala and Machu Picchu in Peru had the greatest influence on *Sonic Adventure*."

■ ■ ■ For the player to fully experience each of these rich virtual environments, Iizuka hit upon the idea of multiple playable characters, each with their own unique gameplay characteristics. While Sonic provided the fast, furious gameplay we all expected, his host of friends could be used to see the world from several different angles. Tails, for example, could fly to previously inaccessible places while Knuckles could climb most walls to reach the heights that Sonic couldn't. "We wanted to make full use of the 3D play field with various types of gameplay," explains Iizuka, "which is what inspired the whole idea of having multiple characters. And the characters were designed around the movements and abilities we needed them to have."

Though most of these additional characters were sourced from previous entries in the Sonic series, two new characters were designed to fit the gameplay that Sonic Team had in mind. The first was E102 Gamma, a flying robot who could lock on and shoot multiple enemies at once, transforming the game into a score-

>. A CHARACTER EVOLUTION



Sonic Adventure saw Sonic overhauled for a new generation. Less tubby than before, his super speed seemed more plausible.



The redesigns continued post-*Adventure*, with Sonic becoming even skinnier and more cool. Yet somehow less lovable.





+ Re-release Adventure +



■ FOLLOWING SEGA'S painful but inevitable decision to abandon Dreamcast and become a third-party publisher in 2001, *Sonic Adventure* was re-released as a special edition on PC and GameCube in 2003. Dubbed *Sonic Adventure DX: Director's Cut*, the re-release offered enhanced graphics and sound, as well as a new Mission mode: 60 different mini-objectives that allow the player to unlock bonus items, including 12 playable Game Gear Sonic titles. In addition, the GameCube version made use of the console's GBA connectivity so players could enjoy Chao nurturing on the go or transfer their Chaos to a copy of *Sonic Advance*, *Sonic Advance 2* or *Sonic Pinball Party*. Compared to the Dreamcast original, the re-releases generally received lower scores from the press, but this critical shift can largely be attributed to rising expectations between one generation and another.


attack target game. The second character, meanwhile, was envisioned to realise a fishing adventure and became Big the Cat, one of the least popular Sonic characters with gamers but a real hit with Iizuka himself. "In comparison to the others, Big does look peculiar," he says, "but he is one of my favourite characters so I have had him appear in several other videogames since."

Sonic himself received the biggest facelift since his 1991 debut. Yuji Uekawa's new design discarded Sonic's podgy frame in favour of a slimline look befitting his speed. Quite unexpectedly, Sonic also found a voice. "We had a lot of mixed reactions when we first decided to make Sonic talk. Of course, no one knew how he should sound at the time, so we took a long time to choose the perfect voice everyone agreed on. We gathered various samples and I recall continuous discussions with Mr Naka and the team members. However, what we were looking for was clear. We all agreed on Sonic's simple and cool attitude, so that was one part where our opinions stayed constant and never collapsed." After several auditions, the role went to Ryan Drummond, an actor whose previous experience amounted to one-off appearances in television shows such as *Baywatch*, but who has gone on to enjoy several starring voice roles following his breakthrough as Sonic.

■■■ While discussing the characters in *Sonic Adventure*, we must not overlook the other, less-obvious hero who was introduced in the Dreamcast game. We refer, of course, to the Chao, a lovable little AI creature that could be crossbred with other creatures and raised like a virtual pet similarly to the Nightopian 'A-Life' creatures of *NiGHTS Into Dreams*. "The A-Life we used for *NiGHTS* was very well reviewed by the consumers, as well as us developers, so implementing that into a Sonic world was something I had in mind from the early stages of development," reveals Iizuka. "In *NiGHTS* it only functioned to give colour to the world, but in *Sonic Adventure* I was hoping to make it something the users could actually touch and raise. Moving around in the 3D environment, as well as being able to intentionally evolve the development of the AI, was way more challenging than what we had achieved in *NiGHTS*. We took a very long time to finalise the Chao design. While being a unique and appealing character, the fact that it has to change form as it evolves

meant we also had to make the design as simple as possible. These points actually did contradict each other, but we felt that both features were necessary."

After nearly three years of inventive design and development, *Sonic Adventure* launched in Japan in December 1998, followed by a US and European release around nine months later. Despite an initial print run of faulty discs in the US, the game received critical applause, many admiring the sheer scale of the game and the way it retained and expanded upon the essence of Sonic without simply imitating *Super Mario 64*. And though Dreamcast failed as a commercial gaming platform, *Sonic Adventure* remained one of its brightest stars, selling more than 2 million copies and spawning an equally successful sequel – a relief for Iizuka and the rest of Sonic Team, who had invested so much time and effort in creating the first real 3D Sonic title.

"We had a lot of strain on the work, more than we had expected," comments Iizuka. "We had to develop six titles' worth of different action games, as well as six sequences of computer-generated cut-scenes for each character, so there was an unbelievable amount of work. The game size was always expected to be very big, right from the pre-production phase, and there were times when we thought of reducing the size along the way, but we finally managed to create the game we had hoped for and wanted to create from the beginning. Because of the team's hard work, we ended up with a very satisfying game filled with rich variety." 

ALTHOUGH BEING 3D DOES HAVE ITS MERITS, USERS DID NOT KNOW WHERE TO GO




■ Big the Cat's fishing mini-game made for the slowest Sonic game ever and didn't go down so well with fans. The character remains a firm favourite of director Takashi Iizuka, though.



WHY I  ...

Rayman Origins

CAMILLE GUERMONPREZ,
ARKEDO


66 *I was recently blown away by Rayman Origins. Absolutely blown away both technically and artistically. It's a gorgeous, beautiful game and the people behind it are real artists. I'd just like to say thank you. Thank you, Mr Ancel. My whole family is a big fan of his work, when they should frankly be a big fan of mine. I think it's great right now because there are so many fantastic games like Journey and Super Meat Boy, and it's a mix between high-level production and indies. Now it is cool to say in the same sentence that I was blown away by Rayman Origins and Super Meat Boy. You're talking about multimillion-dollar games and a very small project.  It's a great future.*





**“It’s a gorgeous,
beautiful game and
the people behind it
are real artists”**

CAMILLE GUERMONPREZ, ARKEDO



“ My first three years at Yale, I got terrible grades because I was working harder at making Apple II games than classes ”

The Man Who Would Be Prince



Unlike the fresh-faced developers of today, **Jordan Mechner** cemented his place in the annals of history before plastic guitars could be found in every household, before Unreal allowed amateurs to create triple-A titles seemingly overnight, even before the internet. But changing the face of videogames forever and defining platforming adventures as we know them wasn't enough. In truth, he was just getting warmed up...



JORDAN MECHNER IS A VERY BUSY MAN. In fact, after more than 25 years in the entertainment industry, 2010 is by far his busiest year to date. In a few weeks, the *Prince Of Persia* franchise will celebrate its 21st year of existence with the launch of *The Forgotten Sands*, its eighth major console release. That will roughly coincide with a \$150 million film adaptation of 2003's brilliant *The Sands Of Time*, for which Mechner will receive the main screenwriting credit – a first for the games industry.

For most people, either of those considerable achievements would be wholly fulfilling, yet Mechner continues to disperse his efforts across a number of ancillary projects. Right now, his career seems poised to reach new heights of success, but Mechner has worked tirelessly since his teens for this moment. Whatever good fortune the next few months bring, it will have been a long time coming.

"When I was a kid, I dreamed of being a writer, animator or filmmaker," Mechner told us during a brief stop on his whirlwind publicity tour for *The Forgotten Sands*. "When I got my first Apple II computer I saw this technology as a way to create games that were also stories, that would draw the player into an imaginary world with human characters."

Much like the pioneers currently exploring the potential of Apple's emergent platforms, Mechner took the initiative with

an emerging technology that most people were still trying to assimilate. "I was impressed by early games like *Breakout* and *Apple Invaders*, which were just as addictive as the games in the local coin-op arcade. I poured my energy into learning to create my own games."

If he were starting out today, Mechner would be able to attend a special school dedicated to teaching game design, and license off-the-shelf engines like Unreal or Source to turn his ideas into reality. Creating games in the Eighties was considerably different. "The hardest part was getting information about how to program," he says. "There weren't any books or courses about programming for the general public, and of course no internet, so I had to learn by trading tips with my friends, who didn't know any more than I did. Also, we didn't have software tools or applications to create graphics or animation, so I had to make the tools in addition to making the game."

Mechner recalls sacrificing his academic career at the prestigious Yale University in favour of fulfilling his ambitions as a game designer. "At that time it was pretty much a novelty to even have a computer," he recalls. "Most college students had Smith-Corona portable typewriters. Videogames were something you dropped quarters into, to kill time. My first three years at Yale, I got terrible grades because I was working harder at making Apple II games than



I was on my classes... like, by a factor of ten. I don't think even my friends suspected how little work I was actually doing to get by. It's a miracle I didn't get kicked out... All through [Yale] I was obsessed with getting my first game published. I'd look at the ads and the bestseller lists and daydream about the day I'd have a game there. I spent three years making games that 'almost' got published, before Brøderbund finally took *Karateka*."

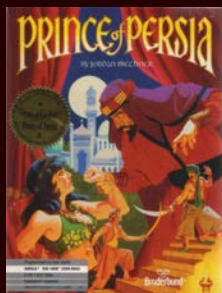
Mechner was taking a class on the history of cinema, and became fascinated with some of the techniques used in early silent films – rotoscoping, cross-cutting, tracking shots. He wanted to use the class as a source of inspiration for a game, and bring cinematic techniques to the Apple II. "My goal was to create a game that was visually sophisticated, yet so easy to play that even a non-gamer could immediately grasp the story, pick up the joystick and become addicted."

Karateka – meaning 'practitioner of karate' – was a breakout hit, ranking as the best-selling game during April 1985 by Billboard magazine. Early sales were well over 500,000, an astronomical figure given that videogames were still in their infancy. "*Karateka* was a life-changing breakthrough for me," says Mechner. "Until then, programming computer games had been my hobby and passion. *Karateka's* success proved to me – and to my parents – that this could be a legitimate career. It helped me decide, right after college, to go on and make another computer game, *Prince Of Persia*."

Karateka would be ported to several other systems, including Commodore 64, NES, and Game Boy, but each was lacking a mischievous Easter egg that Mechner built into the Apple II version. "The programmer doing copy protection for the game figured out that by messing with the bit table, the whole game could be played upside down, which is really hard to do," he explained at San Diego Comic-Con in 2008. "We thought it would be hilarious if we burned the flipped version of the game to the other side of the disk. We figured of all the people who buy the game, a couple would accidentally put the floppy in upside-down. That way, when that person called tech support, that tech support rep would once in a blue moon have the sublime joy of saying, 'Well sir, you put the disk in upside-down,' and that person would think for the rest of their life that's how software works."

MECHNER GRADUATED YALE in 1985 with a BA in psychology, and spent the next several years working towards the release of *Prince Of Persia*, a game that would redefine what the medium could be. At around that time, he began keeping an intricate journal of his experiences in the entertainment industry – now publicly available via his personal website – detailing how *POP* was almost never finished, and how, time and time again, Hollywood dangled a movie deal just beyond his grasp, like a mouse being toyed with by a humourless cat.

Mechner wrote a screenplay in conjunction with the game, and struggled to decide which project he most wanted to see come to fruition. On 2nd October 1985, Mechner logged a journal entry stating, "The Doubt is still there



Mechner returned to *Prince Of Persia* for the celebrated *The Sands Of Time*.

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“Artistically and technically, it was an immensely ambitious undertaking, perhaps bordering on lunacy”

in the back of my mind. It talks to me from time to time. 'Jordan!' it says. 'What are you doing? You're taking a step backward. You want to be a filmmaker. It's time to move on! You brought the Apple-computer-game thread of your life to its climax a year ago. You caught the industry just before it started to die, before you started to lose interest in games yourself. Now you want to do 'just one more game'... Why? Timidity! Fear of

breaking loose! You'll waste a year, man! If you're going to try for Hollywood, now is the time!"

With that gnawing doubt in the back of his mind, Mechner spent the next 14 months preparing to move to San Francisco from his home in New York – he felt that being closer to the videogame and film industries was integral to finding a way into either. At the same time, he was locked in a dispute with Brøderbund over percentages for his new game idea – at that point called *Baghdad* – and a possible sequel to *Karateka*, which the publisher had no intention of letting him develop despite being the copyright holder.

Mechner didn't write a single line of code for 18 months after graduating from Yale. He was developing techniques for capturing lifelike movements and transferring them into a videogame, and while his labour would prove invaluable to *Prince Of Persia's* reputation, it consumed a great deal of his time and, to hear Mechner tell it, sanity.

"I first used rotoscoping in *Karateka*," he explains. "It's an animation technique that goes back to the early days of film – Ralph Bakshi used it in his *Lord Of The Rings*, and Disney animators had used it back in the thirties for *Snow*



Mechner on the set of *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*, which he wrote.

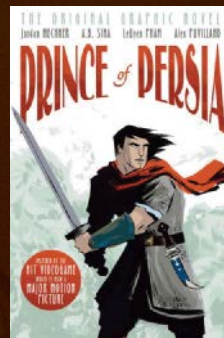
White. My own drawing and animation skills weren't at [a] professional level, so rotoscoping was the only way I could get the character looking as fluid and lifelike as I wanted [it to be]. The challenge was to do it on the Apple II with 1980s technology."

FOR [PRINCE OF PERSIA] I videotaped my brother – who was in high school at the time – running and jumping and doing the moves for the game. I'm embarrassed to confess that, because I couldn't afford a video camera, I bought one that had a 30-day-return guarantee, and then returned the camera after I'd gotten the footage I needed. I set up a 35mm still camera on a tripod in front of the TV, did frame-advance on the VCR and took a picture of each still frame. When I got the prints back from the local one-stop photo, I highlighted them with black Sharpie and white-out, then taped them together and Xeroxed it to make one black-and-white page with a series of clean silhouettes. There was an obscure British company that made a digitizing board for the Apple II. I put the Xeroxed sheet on a table, aimed a cheap black-and-white video camera at it – my Dad had one in the basement from his research experiments – and captured one clean still image into the computer through the digitizer. Once it was in the Apple II, I wrote my own software utilities to clean up and animate the frames and play them in the game. All that just to get a single frame of video into the computer. Today, you could do that on any cell phone."

In February of 1987, Mechner wrote a particularly notable journal entry that marked the earliest major milestone in *Prince Of Persia's* development: "Today, for the first time, I constructed a really large level and played around in it. It



Mechner's first game was the highly influential *Kareteka*.



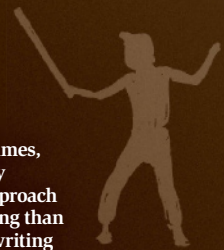
Mechner's work spans many media - games, films, scripts and graphic novels.



A DESIGN FOR LIFE Jordan Mechner gives us an insight into his philosophy of game design

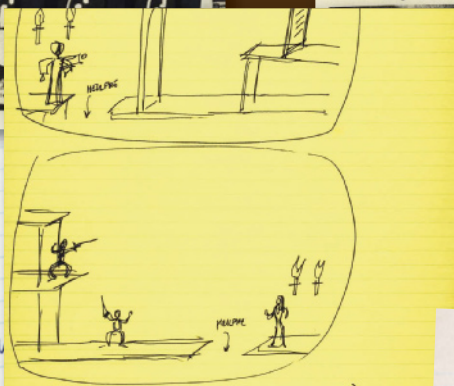
"Writing games, I take a very different approach to storytelling than I do when writing a movie or graphic novel. With movies and novels, the story comes first. With games, the gameplay comes first. The key step in designing or writing a game is to work out what the player will actually be doing - what actions can he performed with the controller; what skills will he learn; what challenges does he face? Then I design the story, characters and mythology to support that."

- Prototype and test key game elements as early as possible.
- Build the game in incremental steps – Don't make big design documents at the start.
- As you go, continue to strengthen what's strong, and cut what's weak.
- Be open to the unexpected – Make the most of any emergent properties.
- Be prepared to sell your project at every stage along the way.
- It's harder to sell an original idea than a sequel.
- Bigger teams and budgets mean bigger pressure to stay on schedule.
- Don't invest in an overly grandiose game development system.
- Make sure the player always has a goal (and knows what it is).
- Give the player clear and constant feedback as to whether he is getting closer to his goal or further away from it.
- The story should support the gameplay, not overwhelm it.
- The moment when the game first becomes playable is the moment of truth. Don't be surprised if isn't as much fun as you expected.
- Sometimes a cheap trick is better than an expensive one.
- Listen to the voice of criticism – it's always right (you just have to figure out in what way).
- Your original vision is not sacred. It's just a rough draft.
- Don't be afraid to consider some BIG changes.
- When you discover what the heart of the game is, protect it to the death.
- However much you cut, it still won't be enough.
- Put your ego aside.





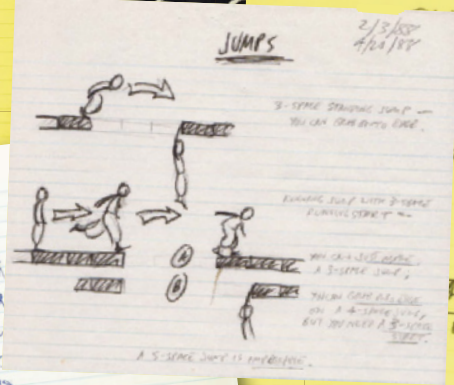
11/20



THE FINAL BATTLE (WITH YOUR SHARP SELF)...
WARD & PRINCESS BEG VOY ON FROM OFFENSE SOFTS...
ARCADE TAPES OVER THE SCREENS...
SHOULD FIND THE ENEMY... SPARKING! HE KUMBARS...
SPARKING! 'SAY... IT'S A TRICK YOU CAN'T WIN...
YOU MUST LIVE HIM TO THE END... IN...



JUMPS



SLIDING FLOOR — P.P. ACTIVATED —
(LOOK TIP)
TWO SECTIONS START SLIDING APART.
TO JUMP OVER WIDENING GAP.

FUN!!!

2 types — L&R — (3 Sec wide each)
& bent floor together
to make a little sticky floor —
or use sticky
catapults
Spring and systems
to walk.



PRINCESS — 16 — DK HAIR
JUNE DUTCH/DANE CAUSE/JUN CAUSE
KID — 16-17 — DK HAIR
SCUFFY LEGS
FROM MINOR/BOYHOOD SPARTAN/ACROBATIC
VIZIER — 40 — CAPTIVE ROBE/BOIL MANDIBLE
MURDERER/AVIL

EMBRAC

ON FIFTH LEVEL
(OR THEREABOUTS)
YOU POP — A MIRROR
YOU BUMP INTO
IT SEEMS THERE'S NO WAY TO GO
BUT —

PRINCE
-OF-
PERSIA

PRINCE OF
PERSIA

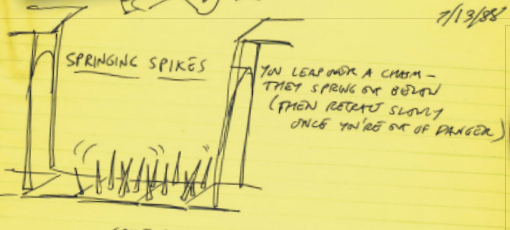
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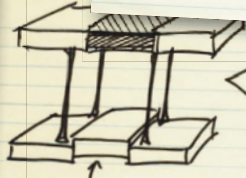
Mechner's
production
designs for Prince
Of Persia - including
the painfully laborious
mo-cap silhouette
plates - show him to
be a true one-man
studio.



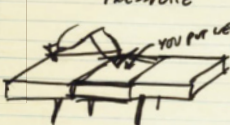
SPRINGING SPIKES
YOU LEAP OVER A CHAIN —
THEY SPRING UP BEHIND
(THEN RETRACT SLOWLY
ONCE YOU'RE OUT OF DANGER)

SPIKES WILL SPRING UP IF YOU RUN THROUGH THEM
(BUT NOT TIL YOU'RE ~~BEHIND~~ PAST THEM, ~~BEFORE~~
THEY DON'T HURT YOU.)

IMPLEMENT SEQUENCE —
YOU WRITE THE ~~MOVEMENT~~ STANCE
ON SPIKES, THEN ~~THE~~
RETRACTMENT LOGIC.
SPIKES SLOWLY RETRACT
LEAVING YOU BOUND
& STILL ON THE FLOOR.
FIN

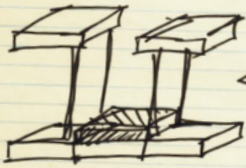


BEFORE :

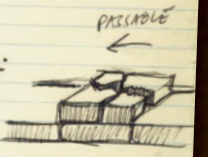


PRESSURE

YOU PUT WEIGHT ON IT —



AFTER :



IT FALLS, LEAVING SPACE ABOVE
AND PRESSURE PLATE BELOW (PERMANENTLY).

THIS CHAIN REACTION IS PASSABLE.

B-2



70 Jump

HARD TO DO... IF YOU RUN WED ONCE UP YOUR
HEAT, YOU'RE SURELY KNOCKED ON YOUR BUTT.



was the first time this game had ever given me the feeling of space. It was kind of thrilling. I think it's going to be a winner. I'm going slowly this time, building on a solid foundation, and I think it'll pay off big."

On 4 May, Mechner received a call from Leading Artists, a well-known Hollywood talent agency. One of the company's agents had read his script, *Birthstone*, and "loved it". A few days later he was on a plane to L.A. for a meeting. "This is ridiculous, dreams-come-true stuff," Mechner scribbled in his journal. "If I saw it in a movie I would never buy it."

Mechner was swept away by the promise of finally achieving his dream of becoming a screenwriter. He spent the remainder of 1987 in and out of meetings, and fielding calls from directors interested in attaching themselves to the project. During this time, he talked to *L.A. Confidential* director Curtis Hanson, and was even introduced to George Lucas at Skywalker Ranch.

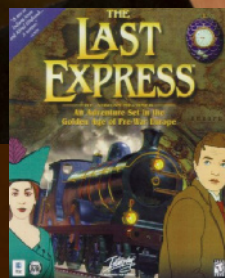
Meanwhile, Brøderbund was suffering from a lack of games, and continued to insult Mechner with an offer of three per cent royalties on *Karateka II* if he gave his permission for the game to be made. Unsurprisingly, he continued to reject the company's advances. It was now November of 1987, and Mechner hadn't done any work on *Prince Of Persia* in six months.

However, despite all of the interest surrounding *Birthstone*, he still hadn't managed to find a studio willing to fund the project. His money was beginning to run out, so Mechner once again threw himself into working on the game. Originally, he had conceived it as a dungeon platformer with no enemies, but by the middle of 1988 he had discovered a way to squeeze more memory out of the Apple II after taking the advice of a colleague. *Prince Of Persia* was already wildly ambitious, but Mechner had unlocked the potential for yet another layer of complexity.

His brother had recently travelled to Japan to become a pro martial artist, so Mechner became the star in a new set of reference videos that he would use to create the game's duelling animations. "I gotta finish this damn computer game," he wrote in his journal on 29 August. "God, I'm restless. I want everything to start happening now. I want to fast-forward through the next five months of gruelling work and just be there... I have no excuse for slacking off. As [a friend] once told me in a letter [about *Karateka*]: 'You dumb shit. You've dug your way deep into an active gold mine and are holding off from digging the last two feet because you're too dumb to appreciate what you've got and too lazy to finish what you've started.'"

By October, Hollywood's interest in making *Birthstone* had dwindled to nothing. Getting his screenplay made into a film had once consumed Mechner's every thought, and he was now more driven than ever before to complete *Prince Of Persia*. On New Year's Day 1989, Mechner set the game's ship date as 30 June. It would eventually hit store shelves on 3 October, but the delay did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the public.

“ I bought a camera that had a 30-day-return guarantee, and returned it after I'd gotten the footage I needed ”



The *Last Express* is Mechner's most ambitious game.



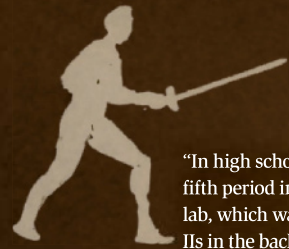
Mechner made *Prince Of Persia* over many years.



Prince Of Persia was an instant critical and commercial triumph. It was hailed as the Game of the Year by numerous retailers, and its sales far surpassed those of his first game. The fluid, realistic animations were a giant leap forward for the medium, and gave it an appeal far beyond the confines of the traditional gaming audience. *Prince Of Persia* had achieved the goal Mechner set himself with *Karateka*. Years of gruelling labour, nagging self-doubt, and chronic impatience had finally paid off.

PRINCE OF PERSIA'S SUCCESS only inflamed Mechner's desire to expand his horizons. He had other dreams to realise and new worlds to conquer. Between 1989 and 1993, when *Prince Of Persia 2: The Shadow And The Flame* was released, Mechner let go of the fears that held him back for so long and sought real-life adventures of his own, travelling across the globe, meeting exciting new people, accumulating wisdom through experience.

Of course, this was only made possible by the \$80,000 royalty checks from *Prince Of Persia* landing in his mailbox on a regular basis. "I've got so much money it hardly seems real," he wrote in his journal in 1992. "It's so much more than I need. The awful thing is, now that I have it, I feel the urge to keep it. It's good that I'm doing this train game. I should spend the money and not worry about it. The conservative impulse, at this point, is not my friend. If I'm not prepared to roll the dice now, when I'm young and on top of the world and the cash is rolling in, when will I ever be? I know myself well enough to know that whatever happens, it won't be my excesses I'll regret, it'll be the things I held myself back from doing. In all my life I've never yet given a present so lavish, or made a gesture so expansive, or indulged



"In high school, I got to spend fifth period in the computer lab, which was just four Apple IIs in the back of the geometry teacher's classroom. And all we did in computer lab every day was play *Karateka*. And on my way there I would get a bagel with cream cheese and a Pepsi. It made an enormous impression on me, and to this day, whenever I see Jordan Mechner, I get hungry for a bagel with cream cheese and a Pepsi."

Tim Schafer, *Psychonauts*

"Jordan's work served as a major turning point in my personal perception towards what games could be. It was the original *Prince Of Persia* that said to me so clearly, "Okay, it's time to start building games." A number of us were gathered around and checking it out at the time. With the rotoscoped animations and fresh sense of theatrical pacing, it was touching on something that none of us had ever experienced in a videogame before. It was the first time we ever felt like we were playing a character that was alive and depending on us. It was beginning to engage us emotionally, out of sympathy for the character, rather than just moving art around on the screen whose sole purpose was to facilitate challenge. This game was hinting at something deeper in the medium's potential. It definitely influenced what was to come from *Oddworld* years later."

Lorne Lanning, *Oddworld*

"*Karateka* was the first computer game that gave me the sense that I was seeing a new form of interactive storytelling. The characters were uncannily real compared to anything I had seen before and the flow of the game was at a new level of cinematic polish for its time."

Will Wright, *The Sims*

"*Karateka* showed that storytelling during gameplay was not only possible, but powerful. Even today, the storytelling of *Karetaka* still works better than many mega-budget action games. One of my favourite games of all time."

David Jafie, *God Of War*



“ Prince Of Persia has gone so far beyond what I could encompass myself ”

PEER REVIEW What do Mechner's contemporaries have to say about him?



a pleasure so recklessly that I regretted it later. Whereas there are so many things I look back on now and think: That was one of the high points, that moment will never come again, why did I hold back? I know it's possible to err in the other direction too, to screw up your life by not thinking of the future. I just don't think I'm nearly there yet..."

The "train game" was *The Last Express*, developed by Mechner's newly formed Smoking Car Productions. Once again, Mechner called upon his prowess with rotoscoping to create an uncanny visual style, but after the success of *Prince Of Persia* what used to seem impossibly ambitious now felt almost prosaic. Mechner wanted to push the boundaries of what was possible in a game even further, and so created an open-ended narrative that required a script of nearly 800 pages. If the auteur couldn't get Hollywood to make his films, he would do so on his own.

"Artistically and technically, it was an immensely ambitious undertaking, perhaps bordering on lunacy," Mechner remembers. "For me, making this game was a life-changing experience. It was my first time starting and running a company. In four years, Smoking Car Productions grew to 60 people – babies were born, friendships were forged. We spent our last nickel on the game, and closed our doors shortly after it shipped, so it probably wasn't the smartest career move for most of us. But it was an adventure that I wouldn't trade for anything."

Mechner's \$6 million labour of love was a startlingly progressive adventure game that tasked the player with solving a murder on the final journey of the Orient Express in 1914. When it was released in 1997, *The Last Express* received nearly unanimous praise, but internal politics at its publishers had a devastating impact on its sales: Brøderbund's marketing department walked out weeks before the game's release, resulting in a virtually non-existent advertising campaign, while joint publisher Softbank left the game market altogether, causing the collapse of its near-finished PlayStation port.

After the commercial failure of *The Last Express* and the closure of Smoking Car Productions, Mechner continued to build his no-budget film repertoire. He was eventually contacted by Don Normark, the author of a book called *Chavez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story*, which examined the destruction of a working-class Mexican-American community to make way for the development of low-cost public housing. Normark had seen Mechner's 1993 student film, *Waiting For Dark*, and believed he was the right person to make a documentary on the subject.

"Making *Chavez Ravine* was an experience like nothing else I've done," says Mechner. "Former residents have told me how much the film has meant to them, even that it brought their families closer together. As a filmmaker, that's the best accolade I could wish for. I'm grateful to everyone who put their hearts and talents into bringing the film to completion and, especially, to Don Normark for trusting me with his story."



The Last Express elaborated on many of the techniques Mechner developed for *Prince Of Persia*.



Chavez Ravine, Mechner's documentary about the early days of Los Angeles, was nominated for an Oscar.



Mechner's film won the International Documentary Association award for Best Short Documentary in 2003, and was short-listed for an Academy Award in 2005. However, the production of *Chavez Ravine* coincided with a renewed interest in the *Prince Of Persia* license at Ubisoft. "*Prince Of Persia* [was] at that time a decade-old 'classic' – i.e., dead – franchise," says Mechner. "The project was developed at Ubisoft's Montreal studio under the leadership of producer Yannis Mallat, who is now CEO of Ubisoft Montreal. For his talented young team... it was a chance to show the world a franchise reboot done right; for an old-timer like me... it was the project that reawakened my joy in making videogames."

P *PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME* was an unalloyed triumph, sweeping the Game of the Year awards across Xbox, PlayStation 2 and GameCube in 2003. As Ubisoft took the Prince in a darker, more violent direction than Mechner would have chosen for its two sequels, he seized the opportunity to pitch Jerry Bruckheimer a movie version of the game in 2004. To Mechner's great surprise, Bruckheimer accepted, and challenged the game designer to adapt his videogame franchise into a blockbuster film. It was everything Mechner had dreamed of: he was the architect of one of the most beloved videogames of all time, and now had the chance to convert it into an epic adventure with the backing of some of the biggest names in cinema.

Between writing the screenplay and the imminent release of the film, Mechner has used his rising stock to branch out into other areas of the entertainment industry. He has shown a particular fondness for graphic novels, penning both a *Prince Of Persia* book and his latest original creation, *Solomon's Thieves*, which will be published this year. Having successfully adapted his own work into a major Hollywood event, he is now preparing to adapt the late Michael Turner's comic series *Fathom*, with Megan Fox attached to star.

Clearly, Mechner has already had one hell of an adventure, but this could be the beginning of a larger, even more extraordinary journey. He is a part of something bigger now – a peerless cog in a contraption made of peerless cogs – but he will never forget what it has taken to arrive at this point.

"What amazes me about the evolution, or explosion, of *Prince Of Persia* over the past 20 years is that it's gone so far beyond what I could encompass myself. The number of people who have worked on *Prince Of Persia* projects – games, movies, books, and now toys – is beyond counting. A few projects, like *Sands Of Time*, the movie, and the graphic novel, I had my hands on directly; they're close to my heart, I'm proud of the work I did on them. At the other end of the spectrum, there are versions of the game I haven't played, books I've never read, and, in a weird way, I'm proud of those too, because even though they're not my own work, they still came from *Prince Of Persia*. It's pretty incredible that all this started with an Apple II game that fit in 48K of memory."



Hall Of Fame...

Mario

In the first of this regular series, games™ dissects the design and appeal of a classic videogame character.

This month: the world's most famous plumber...

■■■■ **SUCCESS STORIES WERE** rare when *Super Mario Bros* hit the Famicom in 1985. We don't need to explain the intricacies of the videogame crash from which the NES emerged, but suffice to say that prior to Nintendo joining the scene things were not good. Mario's first platform outing is often regarded as the game that led to the turn-around of the entire industry, and yet it didn't exactly follow the 'classic game' formula. Unlike trendsetters such as *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids*, *Super Mario Bros* was not a pick-up-and-play game in the traditional sense. It wasn't all about getting top scores, it was a test of will and determination that demanded commitment and an analytical approach, and yet players kept coming back.

Super Mario Bros 2 is often referred to as the 'black sheep' of the family, but this is a little misguided when you look at the series as a whole. While *SMB2* may be a rehash of *Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic*, Shigeru Miyamoto had far more involvement in its creation than he did in the Japanese *Super Mario Bros: The Lost Levels*. While rumours circulated that *Doki Doki Panic* was remade as a Mario game because the 'true' sequel was deemed too hard for Westerners, there's no denying the impact this game had on the rest of the series, or how much it was in keeping with the spirit of the original game in terms of concept and design philosophy. *Super Mario Bros 2* brought us such superb characters as Shy Guy and Bob-Ombs, it established the ever-lovable Toad as a regular character and also introduced the gaming world to what we believe is its first transvestite character, World 1-1 boss Birdo (it's all explained in the game manual if you don't believe us). The Japanese sequel introduced virtually nothing new, except for some added difficulty, but in keeping with what would become the tradition of the series – and a trademark of Miyamoto's work – *Super Mario Bros 2*

is teeming with creativity and 'out there' thinking (you can't even jump on the enemy's head to kill it). In this respect it was everything a *Super Mario Bros* sequel should have been – hardly the oddball cousin it is made out to be.

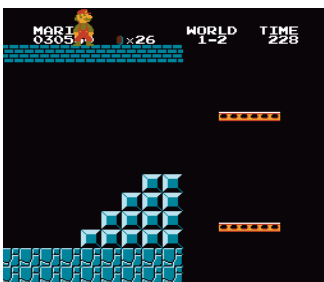
It was *Super Mario Bros 3* that would firmly establish the series as a cultural phenomenon, however. Once again, the series was pushed in new and exciting directions. However, it shows off most of its newest features right from the start in a comfortably familiar setting. The introduction of flight was revolutionary and rather than saving it for later in the game, Nintendo stuck it right up front where everyone could find it in the opening ten seconds. It was also the first Mario title to use

a map screen (which would essentially become playable in the later, three-dimensional years of the rotund plumber), mini-games (now an established staple of the series and platformers everywhere), and actual costumes in the form of the Frog and Tanooki suits. In terms of style, it comes across as the natural successor to the original game, but its

depth of gameplay experience, its playfulness with conventions and its wonderfully colourful mix of levels could only have been borne of the much-maligned *Super Mario Bros 2*. By the time Nintendo stepped into the 16-bit arena, the formula was well established but it now had issues with being both late to the market and up against new-found competition in the form of an abnormally fast spiky animal. *Super Mario World's* success was a slow burn but it's no surprise that despite being a launch title it was the most successful title on SNES.

■■■■ **NO MATTER WHOSE** side you may have taken during the great battle between plumber and hedgehog, it's difficult to ignore the fact that it remained the *Super Mario* design that lead the way for platform titles for years to come. Sure, *Super Mario* was slow and may even have felt a little clumsy at times, but its design was rarely short of perfection and never failed to surprise and amaze. The introduction of Yoshi as well as a scaling down of power-ups in *SMW* compared to *SMB3* created a positive balance that endures as well as any of the other Mario games (if not better). By the time Mario returned to the Game Boy, sporting bunny ears in *Super Mario Land 2*, we couldn't really be shocked or surprised any more. In many respects the gimmicks were running out, but we wouldn't want to leave you with the impression that *Super Mario* was just about the tricks and costume changes. Certainly, they played a part in terms of offering gameplay variations and diverting attention, but the core of what made all these games great was evident from the start: an invitation to explore and experiment with no shortage of reward. Discovery was at the heart of *Super Mario's* brilliance and longevity, which, thankfully, hasn't yet been diminished. And what seemed like madness back in 1985 now makes perfect sense.

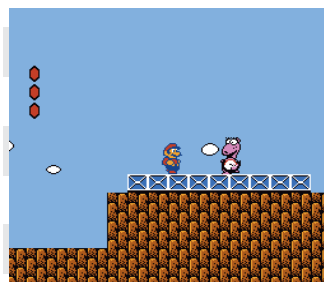
>. MAGIC MOMENTS



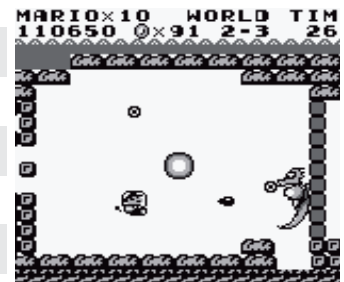
■ Remember the first time you realised you could do this? Videogames haven't been the same since.



■ One of the greatest lines in videogame history: "Our Princess is in another castle."



■ May we introduce Birdo. The first transvestite character in videogames enters stage right.



■ *Super Mario* turns into a shooter, which was amazing if rather peculiar given the series history.

CHARACTER

Mario got his name from the Nintendo Of America landlord in Redmond, Washington. Mario Segale wasn't too happy about the rent payments and his name became attached to some of the promotional material for *Donkey Kong*.

HAIR

It is widely believed that Mario wears a cap because the animators on *Super Mario Bros* couldn't animate hair on the NES. However, Shigeru Miyamoto has claimed that Mario wears a cap because he, himself, cannot draw hair.

MOUSTACHE

Apparently, the designers were hampered by the graphical capabilities of the console once again when trying to draw Mario a mouth. There simply wasn't space and as a result he was given a moustache to compensate and make him look more human.

ARMS

Due to the graphical limitations of the NES, Mario was designed with arms that were a different colour from his body, thus creating the iconic dungarees that have become a constant throughout the Mario series and most of its spin-offs.

DUNGAREES

Mario is best known for wearing blue dungarees and a red shirt, but the original game had him wearing red dungarees and a brown shirt because (have a guess) the console couldn't handle that many colours on screen at once.



■ Gravity just couldn't keep the rising star of Mario on the ground *Super Mario Bros 3* sets him free.



■ The Koopa gunship is an incredible homage to the Star Destroyer opening of *Star Wars*.

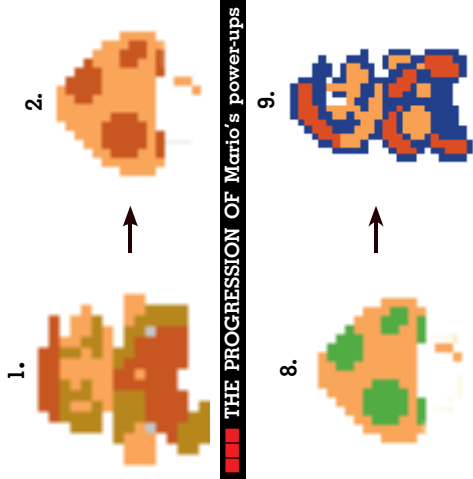


■ For the first – and thankfully not the last – time, Mario tries on some new clothes to magical effect.

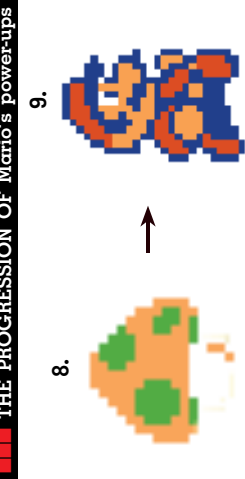


■ Enter the dragon as Yoshi appears for the first time and steals the hearts of gamers everywhere.

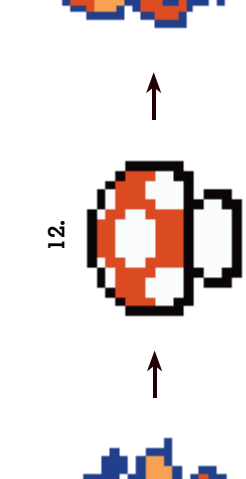
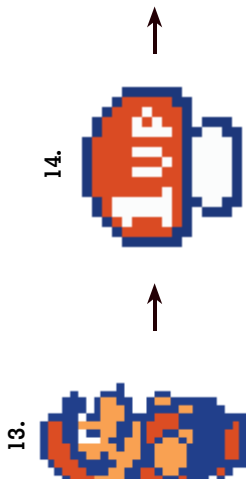
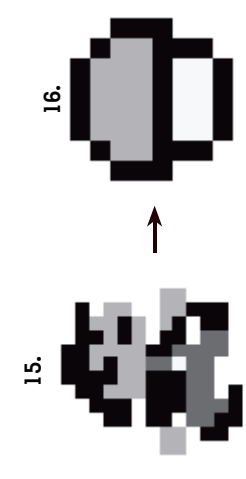
HALL OF FAME... MARIO THE POWER-UPS



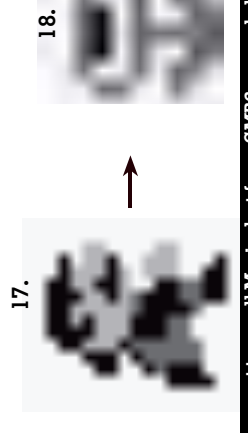
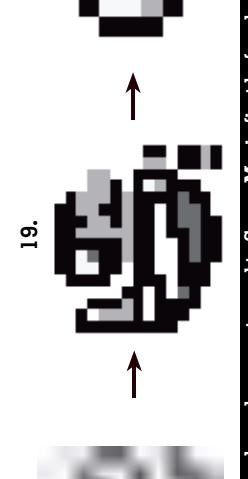
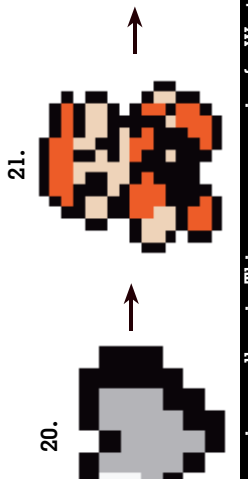
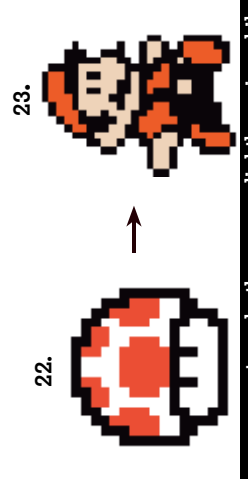
THE PROGRESSION OF Mario's power-ups



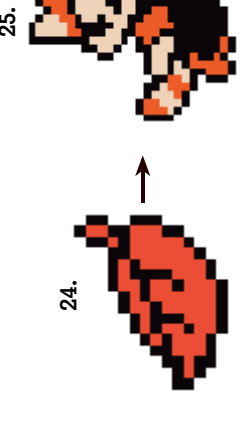
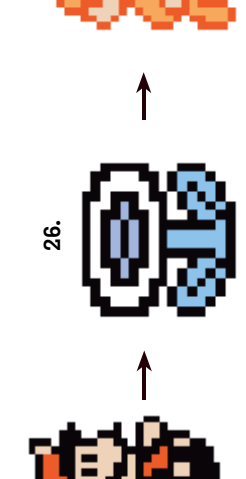
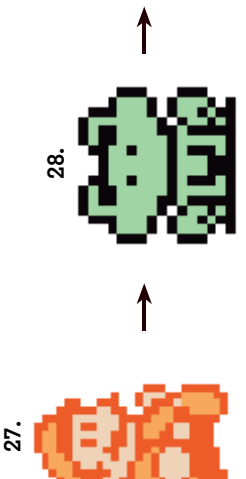
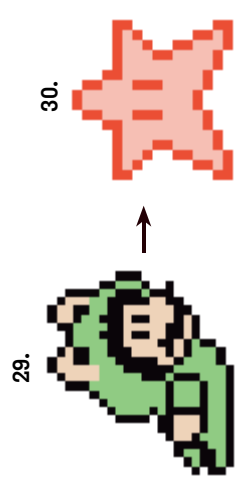
through the series is one of its strongest features and has helped to keep each game feeling fresh and innovative even when the template behind each title has been very similar. Once again SMB2 is unique



to the series in that it starts off with a Super Mario rather than a small Mario and has a power bar maintained by collecting hearts. In the original game an injury to Mario in any powered state would see him



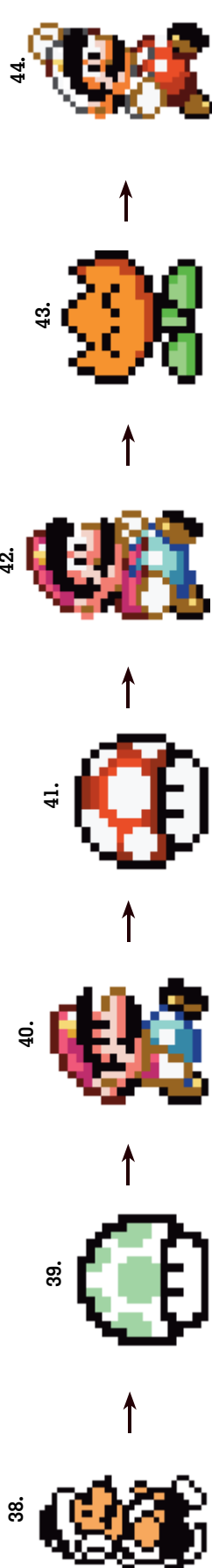
revert to small Mario, but from SMB3 onwards he has always returned to Super Mario first before becoming small again. This was a concession for Western gamers to make the games slightly easier, while



Japanese gamers got the usual, steep decline to mini Mario if they took a hit. Fire Mario remains one of the most popular power-ups in the series, but it was really SMB2 that had the greatest assortment of



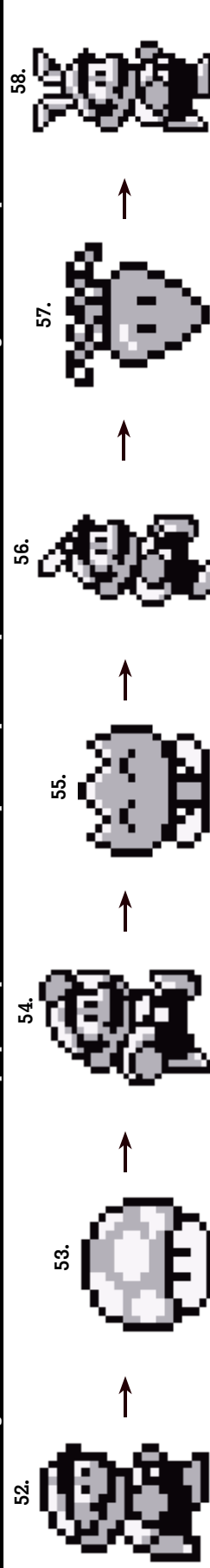
As good as SMW's cape was, it was the introduction of Yoshi that stole the show and essentially ended the reign of power-ups in Super Mario. SMB3's Raccoon Leaf and P-Feather remain the



strongest flying power-ups in our opinion and we've always had a soft spot for the Frog Suit. The Frog and Tanooki suits were the first and only costumes in the series that completely covered Mario's trademark



power-up, but it deserves to be recognised among all the others. It's good to see that Super Mario Galaxy will be reintroducing these special elements to the Mario canon in the form of a Bee Suit.



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- | | | | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Mario (SMB) | 11. Mini-Mario | 21. Mario (SMB3) | 31. Invincible | 40. Mario (SMW) | 50. Balloon Mario |
| 2. Super Mushroom | 12. Super Mushroom (SMB2) | 22. Super Mushroom (SMB3) | 32. Mario (SMB3) | 41. Super Mushroom (SMW) | 51. 3-Up Moon |
| 3. Super Mario | 13. Super Mario | 23. Super Mario (SMB3) | 32. Tanooki Suit | 42. Super Mario (SMW) | 52. Mario (SML2) |
| 4. Fire Flower | 14. 1-Up Mushroom (SMB2) | 24. Super Leaf | 33. Tanooki Mario | 43. Fire Flower (SMW) | 53. Super Mushroom (SML2) |
| 5. Fire Mario | 15. Mario (SML) | 25. Raccoon Mario | 34. Statue Mario | 44. Fire Mario (SMW) | 54. Super Mario (SML2) |
| 6. Starman | 16. Super Mushroom (SML) | 26. Fire Flower (SMB3) | 35. Kuribo (Goomba) Shoe | 45. Cape Feather | 55. Fire Flower (SML2) |
| 7. Invincible Mario | 17. Super Mario (SML) | 27. Fire Mario (SMB3) | 36. Kuribo Mario | 46. Cape Mario | 56. Fire Mario (SML2) |
| 8. 1-Up Mushroom | 18. Fire Flower (SML) | 28. Frog Suit | 37. Hammer Bros Hammer | 47. Starman (SMW) | 57. Carrot |
| 9. Mario (SMB2) | 19. Sky Pop | 29. Frog Mario | 38. Hammer Mario | 48. Invincible Mario (SMW) | 58. Rabbit Mario |
| 10. Shy Guy | 20. 1-Up Heart | 30. Starman (SMB3) | 39. 1-Up Mushroom (SMB3) | 49. P-Balloon | |

“It has an amazing amount of content, it’s cute, funny and goofy, and it takes its gameplay very seriously”

TORE BLYSTAD, IO INTERACTIVE





WHY I  ...

Super Mario Galaxy

TORE BLYSTAD, IO INTERACTIVE

66 I grew up on Commodore 64 and Amiga games and was only exposed to the world of Nintendo at the age of 18. I was a fan of games like Shadow Of The Beast and Barbarian so Super Mario World did seem a little childish, but after trying it I was immediately sucked into the Mushroom Kingdom by the tight gameplay and playful charm and I've been a big Nintendo fan ever since.

My favourite game has to be Super Mario Galaxy - for me it is the most inspired Mario game in a decade. It has an amazing amount of content, it's cute, funny and goofy, and it takes its gameplay very seriously. Few other studios in the world can deliver the kind of diversity and finesse to its mechanics and features, and the integration of software and hardware is second to none. To me, Super Mario Galaxy is pretty much a perfect game.

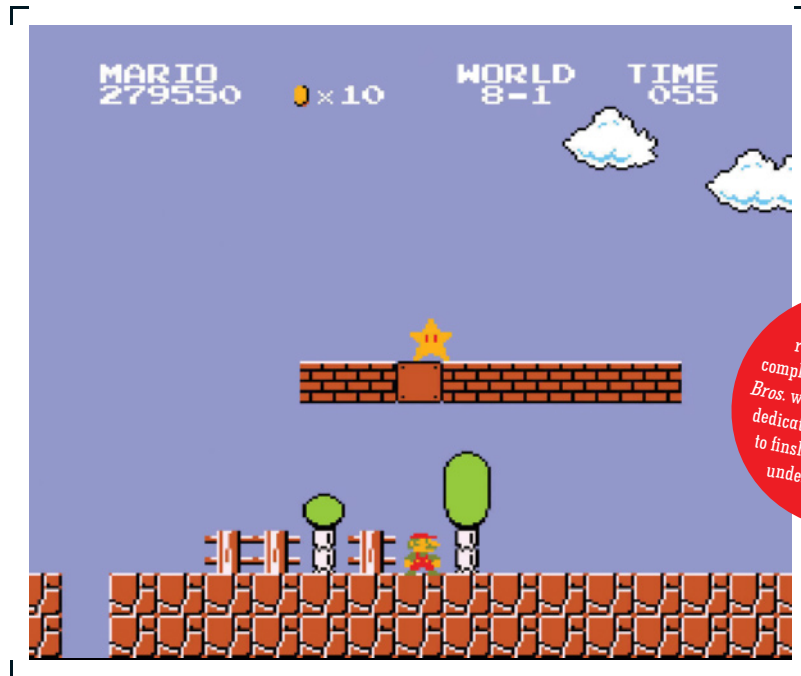


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GAME CHANGERS

SUPER MARIO BROS.

Released: 13 September, 1985 (JP) Publisher: Nintendo Developer: Nintendo R&D4 System: NES/Famicom



The world record time for the completion of *Super Mario Bros.* was recently beaten: a dedicated gamer managed to finish the game in just under five minutes!

The sequel to *Mario Bros.*, *Super Mario Bros.* popularised the side-scrolling platformer and added multiplayer to what became Nintendo's flagship title

ORIGINATING AS A coin-operated game back in 1985, *Super Mario Bros.* eventually became synonymous with the NES – establishing itself as a killer app for the Eighties console. The platformer was a spiritual successor to *Mario Bros.* – a game that attracted a fair share of attention in its own right – but in adding the Super prefix (a trope that would come to define Nintendo sequels and spin-offs), the developer managed to create a game that would come to define the platform genre outright.

The game is not only a classic – generating a buzz on its Japanese and Western releases through, mostly, the rare gift of positive word of mouth – but it also stands up to the test of time. The game remains a relevant and valid example of platforming done well; *Super Mario Bros.* popularised the side-scrolling platformer, and the genre has since seen many contenders attempt to knock *Mario* off his pedestal atop the platforming throne. Few have come close, none have succeeded, and the superiority of *Super Mario Bros.* comes down to one aspect: its mechanics.

Oddly, in a world of moustachioed plumbers, lizard-dragons and Shy Guys, *Super Mario Bros.* is defined by its realistic mechanics. For an 8-bit game, the momentum and subtlety behind Mario and Luigi's movements was incredibly deft, operating on a system that you could understand from the first time you picked up the pad, yet would probably never master. The physics were analogous to real life; if you wanted to attempt a large jump, you'd have to get a running start. Conversely, if you started Mario off on a run (which was wonderfully animated with his stodgy little hands pumping up and down at his sides), you'd have to give him a margin of space to come to a stop in. Critics of the game called the mechanics slippery, but this didn't deter the fans – players who would stick with Mario and his bizarre world indefinitely – who fell in love with the peculiar momentum *Mario* popularised.

■■■ The bounciness of *Mario's* world also appealed to those first coming into gaming proper – jump on an enemy, and you'll have to fine-tune your landing.

DISSECT MARIO

SUPER MARIO BROS. IS PROUDLY PARADED BY A SLEW OF DEVELOPERS AS A HUGE INFLUENCE IN BOTH THEIR LIVES AND THEIR WORK



THE IMPENDING DEATH OF FAMICOM

★ Miyamoto was motivated to create a game that would be a respectable farewell to the NES cartridge system when Nintendo put forward the idea for a disk-based console to take its place. After talking about progressing Nintendo's 'athletic games' remit, the core idea for *Super Mario Bros.* was born.



MARIO BROS.

★ Unsurprisingly, Miyamoto's first foray into the Mario world was more of a proof of concept than anything else – it was *Super Mario Bros.* that took the franchise into the mainstream. Before, Mario had to flip turtles before stomping on them – this was deemed illogical in the revision, hence the bounciness of the platformer we have now.



ACCIDENTS

★ The shifting size of Mario was never actually intentional – in the prototype stages of development, *Super Mario Bros.* only had 'small' Mario, but when the development team altered the size of the levels and Mario stayed the same (becoming 'big'), Miyamoto decided to make Mario 'big' through power-ups.



MAGIC MUSHROOMS

★ Yep. Once the size-changing mechanic was agreed upon, Miyamoto took his influence from folk tales that were based on villagers wandering into forests, eating 'magical mushrooms' and changing sizes – hence why Mario's world became known as Mushroom Kingdom. Who would've guessed it?

It wasn't a matter of simply killing your enemies; that was only half of the battle. The game took full advantage of this, introducing an eclectic cast of villains that took full advantage of the seemingly limited scope that Mario had in his movements. Some would require tackling from above, some avoiding altogether, some only vulnerable at certain times. The power-ups – hidden in boxes that could be completely missed, if you weren't attentive enough – were sparse enough to keep the game challenging, but occurred often enough to always be *fun*, always *worth getting*. The game's level of challenge was perfectly attuned, suitable for all ages and never too easy or too hard for any party to take issue with: the bosses, too, each required dexterity and reflexes to overcome, pushing the simple A, B, and D-pad of the NES to its feasible limit without ever becoming pad-breakingly frustrating.

■■■ The enemies were complemented with level design that made the most of the tight physics, too. The need to constantly alter your vertical position after jumping was highlighted with staggered

SMB OPENED UP A WHOLE REALM OF POSSIBILITIES FOR INTERESTING AND DIVERSE MOVE-SET DESIGNS

KEY FACTS

■ *Super Mario Bros.* is the second best-selling game of all time, with a 40.24 million copies sold record – behind *Wii Sports*' ridiculous 82.45 million sales. (The fact the top two spots are held by Nintendo is telling.)

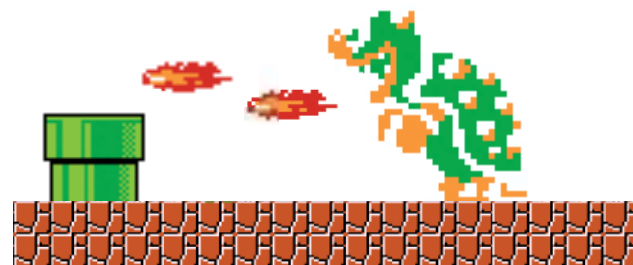
■ The score for *Super Mario Bros.* was originally a lot slower, but composer Koji Kondo upped the tempo of the six featured tracks when he saw players testing the game to match the quick pace of play

■ The original pitch for the game included a shoot-'em-up stage where Mario would fire bullets at enemies from cloud platforms

overground worlds that had high and wide platforms, forming paths into the clouds that felt wondrous and unique. The need to tune your position on-screen as you fell, and delicately press 'Jump' for differential heights, was played upon in the tighter, much more claustrophobic underground sections, too.

Both overground and underground sections were augmented by destructible environments that could throw a curve ball into the mix at any time, plopping you back on a lower level and interrupting your masterplan for completing the level in record time. On top of that, there was even a slew of secret levels tucked into various nooks and crannies of the various worlds, wresting you out of your comfort zone and throwing you into a bonus round of whacked-out weirdness. It was all part of the formula that would come to define *Mario* and his erstwhile franchise, and it was all operating at 100 per cent efficiency from the start.

Everything you'll play in a platforming game of any type nowadays inevitably owes a nod to *Super Mario Bros.*, and it's awe-inspiring to think about just how solidly Nintendo's seminal side-scroller established the genre.



THE 8 BEST SUPER MARIO BROS. HACKS

THE GREAT THING ABOUT GAMES AS SIMPLY CONSTRUCTED AS SUPER MARIO BROS. IS THAT THEY ARE EASIER TO REVERSE ENGINEER THAN THEIR MODERN-DAY COUNTERPARTS. THIS LEADS TO SOME GREAT CUSTOM GAMES SEEPING INTO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN – SUPER MARIO BROS. IS FAMOUS FOR HAVING A VAST ARRAY OF HACKED VERSIONS, SO WE COMPILED OUR FAVOURITES FOR YOUR READING PLEASURE



SUPER MARIO FRUSTRATION

■ A MINEFIELD OF invisible blocks and obstacles impede your progress through every single level of this fiendish re-creation of *Super Mario Bros.* We played a few levels of it, and will happily say it's harder than *Dark Souls*. If you don't believe us, take the challenge yourself – you'll soon understand why we said it.



EXTRA MARIO BROS

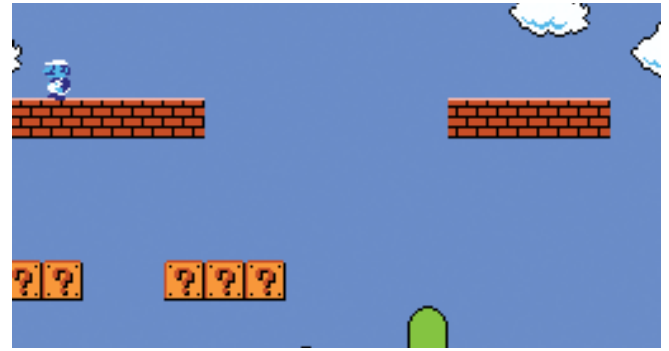
■ A HACK THAT adds new maps, new graphics, new enemies and new power-ups to the game, *Extra Mario Bros.* sometimes doesn't hit the *Mario* template one-for-one, but it's worth playing through just to get to the final boss battle. It's quite a stretch from what you'll be used to seeing in *Mario* games, but it's worth a play.

GAME CHANGERS: SUPER MARIO BROS.



SUPER MUSHROOM

■ REPLACING MARIO WITH Toad, *Super Mushroom* sees power-ups replaced with enemies, new sound effects added for jumping and some reworked graphics and textures. The game is apparently at a '99.9%' difficulty level and is considered one of the hardest *SMB* hacks made.



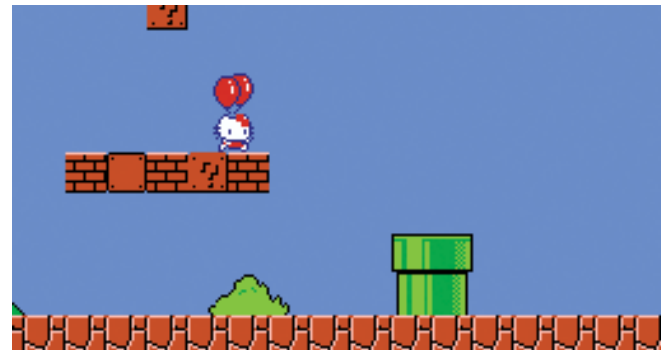
SUPREME ICE BROS.

■ A HACK THAT sees the fire power-up of Mario's replaced with an ice-based attack, *Supreme Ice Bros.* also replaces Goombas with ninjas (who receive a speed boost), sees Bowser become the devil, hidden paths in pre-existing levels and completely remade music. It's stupidly hard, too.



THE NEW STRANGE MARIO BROS.

■ INTENTIONALLY GLITCHY AND oddly designed levels are the trademark of *The New Strange Mario Bros.*, a game that gets harder as it goes on. Infamous for incorporating new graphics that messed around with how the physics of the games worked, *The New Strange Mario Bros.* really was the experience it promised



HELLO KITTY IN THE MUSHROOM KINGDOM

■ THIS BIZARRE HACK takes the sprites from the Japanese NES game *Hello Kitty World* and uses them to replace the eponymous *Bros.* of the original title. Even coming with its own story, the hack is the result of a lot of effort, and actually a surprisingly good game.



LUIGI'S FIRST QUEST: THE SEARCH FOR MARIO

■ ROLES HAVE BEEN reversed, and it's Luigi's time to shine in this hack that places the lankier, greener brother in the shoes of his stodgy younger brother. The hack includes a slew of new levels that take advantage of Luigi's higher jumping prowess.



JOE & MOE PIZZA DELIVERY

■ PROBABLY RIFFING ON the inherent stereotype-bashing inherent to Mario, *Joe & Moe* replaces the majority of the graphics in *Super Mario Bros.* and replaces them with the creator's own take on the Mushroom Kingdom. The levels have been redesigned, too, but not to a particularly high standard.

WHY I



Super Mario Bros.

YOSUKE HAYASHI
HEAD OF TEAM NINJA

Japanese developers tend to shy away from openly naming influences and, sure enough, when faced with the task of selecting his favourite game ever, the softly spoken Team Ninja boss can't offer a straight answer. "It's difficult because games have evolved," he explains. "The concept of having a favourite game of all time suggests that all advancement has stopped dead and that one thing is the very best and nothing can top it. Games are meant to progress. There's always meant to be something that is better than the things that came before it." Despite a noble attempt to dodge the question, Hayashi eventually buckles under the pressure. "If I were to give you a hint, it'd be that it involves a chubby guy with a moustache," he laughs. We assume he doesn't mean his favourite game of all time is Ron Jeremy.





“Games are meant to progress. There’s always meant to be something that is better than the things that came before”

YOSUKE HAYASHI, HEAD OF TEAM NINJA



GAME CHANGERS

Super Mario 64

Released: 1996
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
System: N64

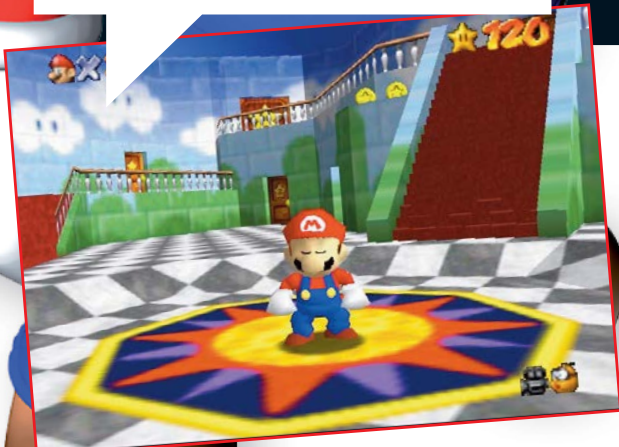


games™ examines the industry's most important videogames, looking at their influence and what made them so great. This month we kick things off with Super Mario 64, the most important 3D platformer of all time

EARLY GAMES OFTEN struggled when they made the jump from 2D to 3D. Franchises that had been so fun to play in 2D suddenly lost part of their charm. When Mario made his debut on the N64, however, he suffered from no such problems. In fact, it's safe to say that his exciting arrival shaped the genre for years to come, while proving that classic franchises could make the supposedly difficult transition to 3D.

And Nintendo certainly knew what it was doing when it unleashed Mario in his new 64-bit playground, giving him a slew of new abilities that allowed him to interact with the game world in new and exciting ways. Creator Shigeru Miyamoto had built *Super Mario 64* specifically around the N64's controller, and the result offered a natural play experience that effortlessly highlighted Mario's many new abilities. The revitalised plumber could scramble up trees and somersault off them, crouch to get into small nooks and crannies, shimmy along narrow passageways, gingerly tip-toe past sleeping enemies, punch foes

**THE BEST
TRANSITION FROM
2D TO 3D IN RECENT
GAMING MEMORY**



BEFORE SUPER MARIO 64

I, Robot

Released: 1983



Although not strictly a platformer, this was the first arcade game to use filled 3D polygons to create an imaginative game world. Dave Theurer's creation was a financial flop, but has since gone on to receive cult status.

3D Ant Attack

Released: 1983



This isometric adventure from Sandy White had you searching the ruined city of Anteschler for your sweetheart, while avoiding deadly ants. Amazingly innovative for its time, it's largely responsible for the popularity of isometric 3D in home computers.

MAGIC MOMENTS

IT'S-A-ME, MARIO!



■ IT WAS IMPRESSIVE enough when your N64 booted up and you were greeted by the mesmerising

face of Mario. It became even more impressive when you realised that you could use the N64's controller to contort his face into all sorts of crazy positions.

BOWSER BY THE TAIL



■ BOWSER FIGHTS HAVE always been memorable, but the power of the N64 allowed Miyamoto's

team to show off. Grabbing the gigantic turtle by his tail and constantly spinning him, before throwing into the ether, elicits a wonderful sense of joy.

TAKING FLIGHT



■ *SUPER MARIO BROS 3* gave you a tantalising taste of flight, but even that couldn't prepare

you for the sheer freedom you felt upon discovering the Wing Cap in *Super Mario 64*. A fantastic moment that still feels immensely satisfying.

that got too close to him, deliver a devastating new bottom bounce, and pull off long jumps, triple jumps and backflips with ease. He was incredibly athletic despite his rotund appearance, but his new skills weren't just to show off the power of Nintendo's new console. Mario's many new skills represented a smorgasboard of choices for the player, allowing him or her to approach Mario's levels in ways that just hadn't been possible in previous platformers.

Super Mario 64's level design was absolutely exemplary. Princess Peach's castle served as a huge hub, with its many rooms allowing Mario to be transported to exciting new game worlds called courses. Admittedly, many of the courses on offer were the staple diet of past platformers – a generic-looking ice world here, an obvious desert world there – but never had they been realised so fully in a game before Nintendo's magnificent release.

UNLIKE PREVIOUS *MARIO* games that presented game worlds split across a set number of levels, the courses of *Super Mario 64* consisted of just one, beautifully designed stage. Each stage was filled with missions that ranged from collecting a set number of red coins to retrieving sunken treasure, racing penguins or facing off against a selection of mini-bosses. Once a mission had been completed Mario would be rewarded with a star. The real beauty of this approach was that the player was allowed to make their own choices throughout each stage, and while each mission was presented to the player in a specific order, it was possible to complete them out of sequence by simply being curious about the

game world. This is *Super Mario 64's* biggest strength because it's constantly challenging the player. Sure you might see a star within tantalising reach, but first you must consider what skills in your considerable repertoire will allow you to acquire it.

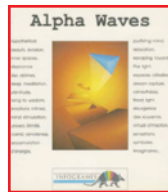
This same approach applies to the way Mario accessed new worlds as well. Virtually every door in Peach's castle had a number on it, which could only be opened once Mario had collected a specific number of stars. Again these doors can be opened in any order (providing you have the set number of stars), building on the multi-path approach that earlier Mario games took. Although *Super Mario 64's* worlds are fairly generic in their approach, their design is beautiful, with the clean, simple textures still impressing today. As the game progressed, however, the visuals became more elaborate and imaginative, with courses like Tiny-Huge Island and Tick Tock Clock really allowing the developers to run riot. Miyamoto had originally planned over 40 courses but memory issues meant that many were dropped, leaving the player with 15 main courses.

Return to *Super Mario 64* today and its influence can be seen in virtually every game you care to look at. Rockstar's Sam Houser once revealed in an interview with *The New York Times* that "Anyone who makes 3D games who says they've not borrowed something from *Mario* or *Zelda* is lying, from the games on Nintendo 64, not necessarily the ones from today". After getting lost in Mario's enchanting world all over again and witnessing the magical touch of Miyamoto in action, we're inclined to agree.

The platformers that were dominant before Super Mario 64 came along

Alpha Waves

Released: 1990



■ This experimental game was released on the Atari ST, before being ported to the Amiga and

PC. It arrived a full six years before *Super Mario 64* and combines exploration with platform-styled gameplay.

Jumping Flash!

Released: 1995



■ This inventive effort from Exact Co drew great acclaim in the early days of the PlayStation, as there was nothing quite like it on the system. Unlike

Super Mario 64 it utilises a first-person perspective and is a far more arcade-like experience.

Bug!

Released: 1995



■ *Bug!* was one of the Saturn's earliest platformers, with the annoyingly voiced insect filling in for Sonic, who was absent at

launch. It uses clever graphic techniques to create the illusion of 3D, but is otherwise a conventional platformer.

KEY FACTS

- A 3D *Super Mario* using the FX chip was allegedly in development for the SNES, but Dylan Cuthbert recently debunked this rumour.
- *Super Mario 64* sold incredibly well for Nintendo, shifting over 11 million units. It's unclear how many of these were based on the N64's pack-in promotion.
- In addition to being built around the N64's controller, Shigeru Miyamoto and his team also built *Super Mario 64* around its camera and characters.
- *Mario 64* didn't just influence platformers; Rare's Martin Hollis revealed that *GoldenEye's* mission structure was borrowed from it too.



SUPER MARIO GALAXY

Released: 2007

■ THE WII'S first 3D *Mario* upped the ante for the

franchise and the genre in general by introducing all sorts of clever play mechanics. Gravity-based levels were the most obvious, but new power-ups like the Bee and Spring suit also took the gameplay in a fresh direction.

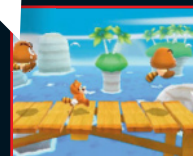


SUPER MARIO GALAXY 2

Released: 2010

■ SOMEHOW THIS superb sequel managed

to improve on virtually every aspect of its incredible predecessor. Levels design was exemplary, the introduction of Yoshi offered new gameplay options, while the level structure and approach feels more like *Super Mario 64*.

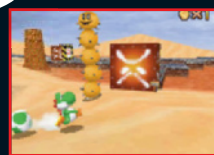


SUPER MARIO 3D LAND

Released: 2011

■ GREAT THINGS were expected from the first 3DS *Mario*

game and developers Nintendo EAD Tokyo did not disappoint. Aply assisted by Brownie Brown and DigitalScape, the focus was to make a 3D *Mario* game that played like a 2D one, which was effortlessly achieved.



SUPER MARIO 64 DS

Released: 2004

■ THIS LAUNCH title for the DS featured

a number of notable enhancements, making it worthy of inclusion here. In addition to letting you play as Luigi, Wario and Yoshi, it also introduced a host of excellent mini-games built around the DS's controls.



SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE

Released: 2002

■ WHILE THE GameCube's first *Mario* title

introduced an occasionally wonky camera, it also saw the debut of FLUDD. The Flash Liquidizing Ultra Dousing Device was an excellent item that helped Mario defeat bosses and tackle obstacles.

THE SEQUELS

WHY HAPPENED

WHAT SHIGERU MIYAMOTO DID NEXT



METROID PRIME

Released: 2002

■ WHILE THE core game was created by Retro Studios, Miyamoto had

an important role in *Metroid Prime's* development. Originally intended as a third-person shooter, Miyamoto consistently steered the direction of the game to something that was more his liking. The tough love was worth it, as it became **games™**'s first 10/10.



PIKMIN

Released: 2001

■ MIYAMOTO HAS often based his games on his own

personal experiences. While he's never visited another planet (as far as we know) he is a keen gardener. *Pikmin's* inspiration comes from Miyamoto's love of gardening and it morphed into an intriguing strategy game with interesting game mechanics.



NINTENDOGS

Released: 2005

■ ORIGINALLY BEGINNING life as a GameCube demo, *Nintendogs* came about when

Miyamoto bought a dog for his family. It turned into one of the DS's most popular games, well received by both critics and gamers alike, and eventually going on to sell over six million units. A sequel with added cats launched on the 3DS in 2011.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

Released: 1998

■ MIYAMOTO SHARED directing

duties with Yochi Yamada, Yoshiaki Koizumi and Eiji Aonuma on *Ocarina Of Time*. The end result was a fantastic addition to the *Zelda* series that, like *Super Mario 64* before it, effortlessly crossed the two dimensional boundary into 3D.



STARFOX 64

Released: 1997

■ THIS WAS an incredible sequel to the SNES game

that offered operatic space battles, a new multiplayer mode and the new 'All-Range Mode', which removed the on-rails gameplay for certain parts of the game. Miyamoto worked in a producing role on this title, but his touch throughout is obvious.



SKYLANDERS: SPYRO'S ADVENTURE

Released: **2011**
 ■ **SPYRO WAS** first released

as a conventional platformer in 1998, but the franchise was rebooted with phenomenal success in 2011. Now known as *Skylanders*, it featured unique toys that would come to life onscreen when placed on the Portal Of Power.



PSYCHONAUTS

Released: **2005**
 ■ **TIM SCHAFER** has gone on record to say that *Super Mario 64*

influenced his quirky 2005 release. Boosted by a magnificent story and genuinely interesting characters, it's an interesting addition to the platformer that has all the usual quirks you'd expect from a Double Fine game.



PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

Released: **2003**
 ■ **JORDAN MECHNER**

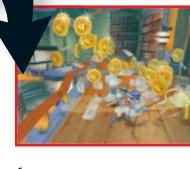
returned to his critically acclaimed Apple II game, reinvigorating both the genre and the franchise with the excellent *Sands Of Time*. It's as much a puzzler as a platformer, with the player having to work out the best route.



JAK & DAXTER: THE PRECURSOR LEGACY

Released: **2001**
 ■ **WHILE MANY** aspects of the gameplay

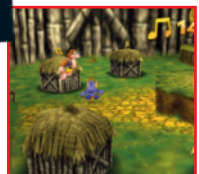
were fairly conventional, it featured impressive behind the scenes work, delivering a seamless world free of mid-game loads, a complete lack of fogging and impressive high resolution textures.



SLY COOPER AND THE THIEVIUS RACCOONUS

Released: **2002**
 ■ **THIS CLEVER** platformer

features an entertaining cast of cuddly heroes, clever level design and some imaginative boss fights. Like *Rayman*, the gameplay is fairly conventional, but its rich world and fun characters make it well worth returning to.



BANJO-KAZOOIE

Released: **1998**
 ■ **RARE'S OWN** love letter to *Super Mario 64* also helped take the platformer in

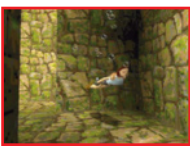
new and exciting directions. It featured the same mission-structured base of *Super Mario 64*, but included two main characters who could interact with each other in a number of interesting ways to slowly unlock the huge game world.



EARTHWORM JIM 3D

Released: **1999**
 ■ **SHINY** ENTERTAINMENT unfortunately

felt ill-equipped to work on this 3D sequel, so development was handed over to VIS Entertainment. The end result was sadly a plodding and laborious platformer, which, while it could be funny in places, just couldn't compare favourably to Jim's 2D original adventures.



TOMB RAIDER

Released: **1996**
 ■ **ALTHOUGH** TECHNICALLY more rightly classified as

an action/adventure game, there's more than enough platforming elements in Lara's first adventure to justify its inclusion here. It lacks *Mario's* impressive 3D camera, but it nevertheless offers a fantastic sense of scale, particularly on later levels.



SONIC ADVENTURE

Released: **1998**
 ■ **THERE WAS** a lot riding on Sega's first proper 3D *Sonic* platformer,

and *Sonic Adventure* didn't really disappoint. The action stages easily captured the essence of the massively successful 2D games. It was later rereleased on GameCube, Xbox 360 and PS3.



RAYMAN 2: THE GREAT ESCAPE

Released: **1999**
 ■ **MICHEL ANCEL'S** second *Rayman* game

was easily one of the most impressive 3D platformers around and a huge improvement over his original game, being immensely playable. While the gameplay is fairly linear compared to the approach of *Super Mario 64*, it's full of neat little touches and plenty of sly humour.

Super Mario 64 was a revolutionary platformer that changed the genre. Here we look at its impact on the industry, examining its sequels, the many games it inspired and what its talented creator did next

THE KEY 3D PLATFORMERS THAT FOLLOWED

AT THE ENDED XT

WHY I



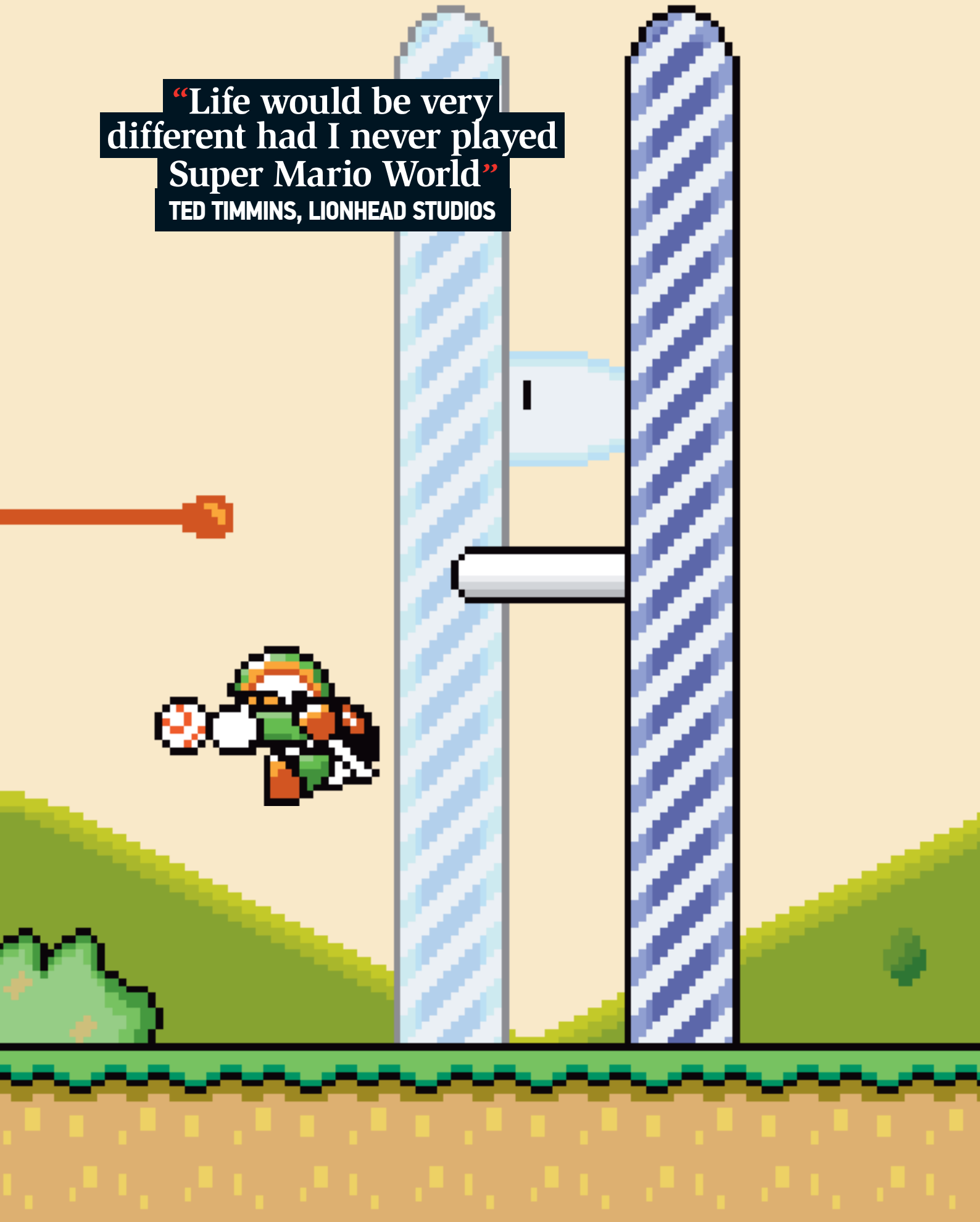
Super Mario World

TED TIMMINS,
LIONHEAD STUDIOS

“Super Mario World will always be one of my favourite videogames. I remember playing it for the first time; I was nine years old and had a Commodore, but my friend had a fancy new SNES thing, so I went over to his house after school to see what all the fuss was about. My life changed right at that moment. The level he was playing was Vanilla Dome 2, and I felt like I had just witnessed the future. The sounds, graphics, and physics for platform jumping were all perfect. To this day, I don't feel it has aged and remains the perfect example of everything a 2D platformer should be. I enjoy completing it once a year, not just for tradition, but because it still brings me so much joy. Life would be very different had I never played Super Mario World.”



**“Life would be very
different had I never played
Super Mario World”
TED TIMMINS, LIONHEAD STUDIOS**



Greatest
RETRO
 Game
 Ever

Yoshi's Island



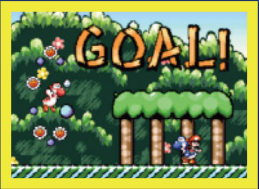
Shigeru Miyamoto isn't known for disappointing people but that doesn't mean he hasn't taken risks. Take Super Mario World 2 – instead of offering gamers more of the same, the Nintendo legend turned Mario into a baby and made Yoshi the main character. Madness maybe, but it worked...



Release: 1995
Format: SNES
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-House

POINTS MEAN PRIZES

Although rescuing Baby Luigi shouldn't take too long, a gamer wanting to unlock every secret level will be playing for weeks. On every round there are five flowers, 20 coins and 30 stars for Yoshi to collect, many of which are hidden away and all of which contribute to a final score out of 100. If Yoshi collects all the items in a zone's levels, he'll be rewarded with some of the hardest platforming ever designed. Anyone that manages to unlock and complete every secret level is not only an incredible gamer, but also a true hero deserving of the finest seat in heaven.



Such is the quality of the Mario series, that almost every single instalment could be considered the Greatest Retro Game Ever. With titles like *Super Mario Bros 3*, *Super Mario World* and *Mario 64* under his belt, who would deny the moustachioed Italian the accolade of the world's finest videogame? Ironically, it's Yoshi – a little green dinosaur who until 1995 was little more than Mario's mount.

Yes, despite its name, *Super Mario World 2* isn't really about Mario at all. Naturally, he is involved in some way but as he's neither featured in typical form – he's a newborn baby – nor is he a playable character, it seems unfair to give Mario credit for this platforming masterpiece. Instead, all praise should be directed toward Yoshi, an instantly likeable protagonist with a wide variety of eccentric moves.

Indeed, it's Yoshi's special abilities that make *Super Mario World 2* such a unique platforming experience. The crux of Yoshi's powers stem from his tongue, a bright red appendage that's so long it puts Gene Simmons to shame. Yoshi uses it to suck smaller enemies into his mouth, he can then either spit them back at advancing enemies, or digest them to make speckled green



▲ Never say Nintendo isn't socially responsible – this is as good a reason not to take drugs as any.



▲ There's always a lot going on in *Yoshi's Island* and there are always many enemies to overcome.

eggs. These eggs can then be used in a variety of different ways, such as firing at distant enemies, breaking through walls and shooting at items that are out of Yoshi's natural reach. This is especially useful for gaining extra lives and other bonus items.

In addition to these, Yoshi has numerous other skills at his disposal. First, by holding down the B-button while jumping, Yoshi flaps his arms and keeps himself airborne for a little longer than, say, Mario or Luigi could. This means that he can clear far greater distances, and, on occasion, it also means that missing a leap to an awkward platform won't spell inevitable death. However, Yoshi's weirdest faculty is surely his ability to turn himself into a variety of Yoshi-faced vehicles. These include a car, a helicopter, a submarine, a train and a strange mole-like digging

machine and are initiated by hitting bubbles that are strewn throughout the environments. Admittedly, the vehicle sections aren't particularly in-depth, but they do add great diversity to the levels.

Having said that, it's not as if *Yoshi's Island* is lacking in fantastic level design; all of the standard Mario fare – falling platforms, lava pools, bottomless pits – is present as well as countless other great ideas. Nearly every level has an original gameplay element, be it pushing a boulder through a cavern, riding a ski lift between alpine peaks or hopping between hot air balloons in a race to the top of the screen. And, thanks to the fantastic cartoon-style graphics, it all looks great too. What's more, by the end of *Yoshi's Island* there are some cripplingly difficult levels – *New Super Mario Bros* this most certainly is not.



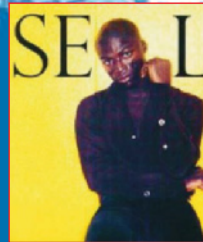
You might be wondering why Yoshi would put himself through all of this, and, in typical Mario style, the reason is both short and satisfying. Basically, a stork carrying both Baby Mario and Baby Luigi is intercepted by an evil wizard who goes by the name of Kamek. Baby Mario falls onto Yoshi's Island and is discovered by various uniquely coloured Yoshis while the nasty Kamek and Baby Bowser hold Baby Luigi hostage. Carrying Mario on their backs, the Yoshis decide to rescue Baby Luigi and set up a relay system whereby each level is tackled by a Yoshi of a different hue. And so yet another classic platformer begins.

However, carrying Baby Mario isn't a mere visual effect – his presence is integral to the gameplay. This is because Yoshi doesn't actually take any damage from being hit by enemies; he just loses Baby Mario from his back. When this

happens Yoshi is momentarily stunned, a weeping Mario floats off in a bubble and a ten-second countdown begins. If Yoshi touches the bubble before the timer reaches zero, Mario returns to his back and the counter gradually returns to ten, if he doesn't then Mario is whisked away by a kidnapping squad and Yoshi loses a life. The beauty of this system is that not only are players able to make up for repeatedly making tiny mistakes, but also that the levels can contain far more enemies and traps without it becoming unfair.

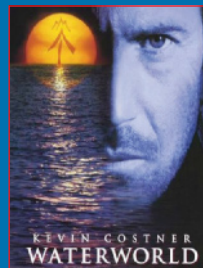
Unfortunately, in spite of the game's brilliance, its 1995 release was toward the dying end of the SNES's lifespan and sadly, not enough gamers ever got to play it. Thankfully, an identical version is available on GBA so there's no reason not to visit *Yoshi's Island*.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF 1995



ON THE RADIO

Most people know of Seal Henry Olusegun Olumide Adeola Samue (Seal to his friends) because of his 1994 single *Kiss From A Rose*. It was its inclusion in the *Batman Forever* soundtrack a year later, however, that helped the song top the UK charts. This also helped Seal win two Grammys and the adoration of beautiful women the world over – including his future wife, supermodel Heidi Klum.



AT THE MOVIES

Few films are derided as much as Kevin Costner's *Waterworld*. Financially considered the biggest ever box office flop upon its release, overseas success and video sales actually meant that it wasn't a complete fiscal disaster. Not only that, if you can ignore the fact that even if the ice caps did completely melt the sea would only rise by about 70 metres, it's actually not as bad as most people make out.



ON THE TELEVISION

At the height of *X Files* mania, sci-fi fans were treated to another promising series on the Fox network. *Sliders* revolved around a bunch of travellers that used wormholes to move between different dimensions. The first two series started off well but it didn't take long before Fox started meddling with the format of the show. It lasted three more seasons but was axed in 2000.





SUPER MARIO WORLD 2: YOSHI'S ISLAND SNES [Nintendo] 1995

■ Baby Bowser hasn't quite reached megalomaniac status when Yoshi stumbles into his playroom at the end of *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's World*. This spoilt brat demands to ride the "green donkey" and throwing a right temper strop when Yoshi fails to oblige. It's after a few precision ground pounds from Mario's loyal steed that the infant is knocked on his rump bawling, only for Kamek to appear and cast a spell that transforms Prince Koopa into gigantic proportions. With the castle flattened, Bowser creeps towards Yoshi until he engulfs the entire screen, spitting fireballs and sending debris tumbling down to destroy the ground. Even as a child Bowser proved his nuisance value and an eternal rivalry was born.



EARTHWORM

JIM™



A superb range character, a hefty dose of surrealism and some natty platform action all add up to one groovy game

LAUNCH TIME

There are many fine moments throughout *Earthworm Jim*, and it's difficult to pick one in particular, but we would have to opt for the cow launch. In a game that features as much surreal content as this, the standard has to be set early on, and the game manages this with style. After only a few minutes of play, you meet a cow on a rudimentary seesaw. It stands there, watching as you drop a fridge on one end and catapult it into the heavens. Of course, the cow has the last laugh, as it also features heavily in one of the most amusing game endings we've ever encountered.



▲ Shoot the fridge, launch the cow. It really is that easy to make us laugh.

Release: 1994
Format: SNES, Mega Drive
Publisher: Playmates/Virgin
Developer: Shiny Entertainment

There have been many attempts at originality over the years and every so often we get a team that presents a title that's 'all-new'. Maybe it's a new way of dealing with a genre, or a fancy new feature that adds a new dimension to play, but few can claim to have created something that we'd never have dreamed of. Nope, many developers fail miserably when trying to 'weird' gamers out. It's a fact that we've been conditioned over the years and have been trained to cope with surprise attacks and abnormal enemies, but when *Earthworm Jim* arrived 12 years ago, few were prepared for the chaos.

The plot alone is absurd. Once a regular worm, Jim turned superhero when the Ultra-High-Tech-Indestructible-Super-Space-Cyber-Suit (aka Super Suit) was dropped by a space crow, and landed on top of him. Now charged with the tasks of rescuing Princess What's-Her-Name from the evil Queen Pulsating, Bloated, Festering, Sweaty, Pus-filled,



▲ We think all games should have a dancing Evil.

Malformed Slug-For-A-Butt and keeping the suit out of the hands of the demented Psy-Crow and Professor Monkey-For-A-Head, he had seven bizarre stages to blast his way through. Shiny triumphed when it came to thinking up ideas for the various missions, and there is a wealth of weirdness on offer to those that persevere through the game. Starting off your adventure in a junkyard, you progress on to Heck (which includes the Night On Bald Mountain soundtrack), an underwater hamster tube maze (which includes the most frustrating part of any game ever – you must remember that glass orb that smashes, killing you instantly after a few wall hits?) and then finally to the Queen's home planet, Buttville.

Of course, the real treat is the level of gameplay that *Earthworm*



▲ Use your wormy head to whip a puppy. Great.

Jim delivers. Frantic 360-degree firing sets the base for most of the stages, with reasonably complex whipping and swinging sections complementing the action nicely. Between each and every one of the aforementioned levels you're forced to engage in a rocket race with Psy-Crow which, if lost, results in an extra boss battle with the pesky bird – unnecessary really, as awesome bosses are a frequent affair.

These bosses really were some of the greatest ever seen. We've all faced giant spaceships and monsters before, but a showdown with the rather scratchy Evil the evil cat? Well, that's something special. And to finally conquer the evil genius Bob The Goldfish (a task completed merely by walking into a table and knocking over his bowl – actually achievable in about two seconds),



▲ The level entitled 'Heck' featured evil lawyers that threw paperwork at you and hid behind a briefcase shield.

"SHINY TRIUMPHED WHEN IT CAME TO MISSION IDEAS"

you'd have to be rather sceptical not to appreciate the genius. However, as good as they are, all the bosses in the game are shown up by Major Mucus the bungee jumping bogie.

Taking place in the obviously named Snot A Problem level, you control Jim as he ties his long, stretchy head to a hook and competes with Major Mucus in a bungee competition. Gradually you wear away his support by barging him into walls, and eventually he drops into the goo at the bottom of the pit. "Success!" you cry, before realising that you just completed the easiest of the three bungee rounds. We just loved it.

Fortunately, we weren't the only ones. The greatness of *Earthworm Jim* was recognised by many and an adequate sequel was produced a year later, then followed a 3D offering on the N64, and eventually a decent animated series also turned up to provide playgrounds with a host of annoying catchphrases.

As great as all this was, though, none of them ever quite showed the same inventiveness that the original displayed and the first title still remains the best by far. Who knows, maybe we'll see Jim and friends again some day – there's certainly still a lot of potential left for the franchise to fulfil.



OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF 1994



ON THE RADIO

No matter where you were, what you were doing or listening to, *Saturday Night* by Whigfield managed to worm its way into your ears throughout 1994. Despite being wretchedly annoying and having a stupid video showing the starlet drying her hair, wearing only a towel, the song managed to dominate the charts due to people buying it anyway.



AT THE MOVIES

For some reason it was thought necessary to create a live-action film based around kids' favourite *The Flintstones*. Starring John Goodman, Rick Moranis and Halle Berry, we only realised how good this was once the hateful sequel – *Viva Rock Vegas* – made an appearance with no famous faces and showed us exactly how a film shouldn't be done.



ON THE TELEVISION

Disney's *Darkwing Duck* unfortunately came to an end in 1994 after enjoying none of the success it deserved. It was kind of like *Duck Tails* but had mild-mannered Drake Mallard instead of Scrooge McDuck. It also had more superheroes. As a bonus, it featured *Duck Tails* characters Gizmoduck and Launchpad on a regular basis. Let's get dangerous indeed.



▲ Racing Psy-Crow was not only really tough as you neared the finale, it also gave you one hell of a headache.

Hall Of Fame...

Earthworm Jim

This issue we look back at the groovy super-powered annelid who wormed his way to 16-bit stardom

■ **PLATFORM GAME CHARACTERS** are ten a penny and only the genuinely great ones have endured. In fact, you can count on one hand the notable and lasting platform characters that emerged from the 16-bit era. Earthworm Jim's arrival on Mega Drive, however, caused quite a stir back in 1994. It was a wonderful mix of run-and-gun meets action/platformer but rife with wit and capricious humour that parodied everything from film to Tex Avery cartoons and other videogames. It was as loud and as brash as games came back then, and kids lapped it up, especially as the central character leading this charge was equally as radical, comical and unique as the game he appeared in.

Designed by Doug TenNapel, the talented animator behind Nickelodeon show *Rugrats*, and brought to life by Shiny Entertainment founder David Perry, Earthworm Jim was one of the most unusual platform heroes to hit the scene. Shiny's team of artists, programmers and magicians used a nifty animation technique called 'Animotion' on the Mega Drive, achieving some unbelievable technical feats on Sega's 16-bit machine.

■ **FOR THOSE UNFAMILIAR** with *Earthworm Jim's* story, the game manual explains that Jim is just a regular earthworm doing regular earthworm-like things when an 'ultra-high-tech-indestructible-space-cyber-suit', built by Professor Monkey For A Head, falls to earth and lands on him, bestowing him with a bunch of cool super powers. It later transpires that the suit was commissioned by an evil queen – with a name so long we can't be bothered to type it – in her bid to conquer the galaxy. Basically, somewhere along the way the suit got lost, fell on a worm, a princess got kidnapped and the worm sets off to rescue her. Though the story verges on the ridiculous, you do get a sense that everyone involved in its creation had a blast making it, and that sense of fun and wackiness really shines through.

Shiny employed some clever tricks to help Jim stand out from his peers. As well as his super-powered suit, he was blessed with a multitude of moves at his disposal, and many saw the character used in a wacky and comical way – be it as a whip to lash out at enemies, swing from environments, or even zip around like copter rotors to ensure a soft landing from lofty ledges. Furthermore, he was armed with a satisfying red hand cannon that acted like an uzi, immediately helping him look a lot cooler than blue hedgehogs or paunchy Italian plumbers.

Following the release of the first game, which gleaned all sorts of awards and accolades, predictably, sequels followed. Perry, TenNapel and Shiny Entertainment all returned for the follow-up, *Earthworm Jim 2*, which, while certainly recapturing the zany spirit of the original, some fans argued wasn't quite as tight as the original with Shiny ramping up the quirkiness by adding a plethora of different gameplay styles and wacky set pieces diluting the excellent run-and-gun action from the first game. The next two *Earthworm Jim* releases were made without Shiny's involvement, these were *Earthworm 3D*, and the Game Boy Color game, *Earthworm Jim 2: Menace To The Galaxy*. The first was an awkward and uninspired transition into 3D for Jim and the latter, which was more in keeping with previous instalments, was based on the popular animated television show based on the character at the peak of his popularity.

Since then, apart from a few cameos in *ClayFighter 63 1/3* and the PC version of *Battle Arena Toshinden*, things became relatively quiet for Jim who, like regular earthworms, seemed to just spend the next few years with his head in the soil. After a failed attempt by David Perry and Atari a few years back to reunite the original team to create a brand new classic two-dimensional game for the PSP, it seems Jim is finally starting to worm his way back onto the scene. His first 2D platform outing is already available on Nintendo's Virtual Console service with the sequel expected to follow, plus there are rumours that a new game, with the guidance of TenNapel, could also be in the works.

Whatever the future has in store for our old friend Earthworm Jim, one thing is for sure: he remains one of the quirkiest and most successful platform game characters ever to emerge from the West, and could stand shoulder to shoulder – with the aid of his suit, of course – with the cream of Japanese creations. Not too shabby for a modest little earthworm.

>. MAGIC MOMENTS



■ We're introduced to Jim and the type of humour rife in the game during Sega's loading screen.



■ Jim got his own TV show, and was voiced by Dan 'Homer Simpsons' Castellana.

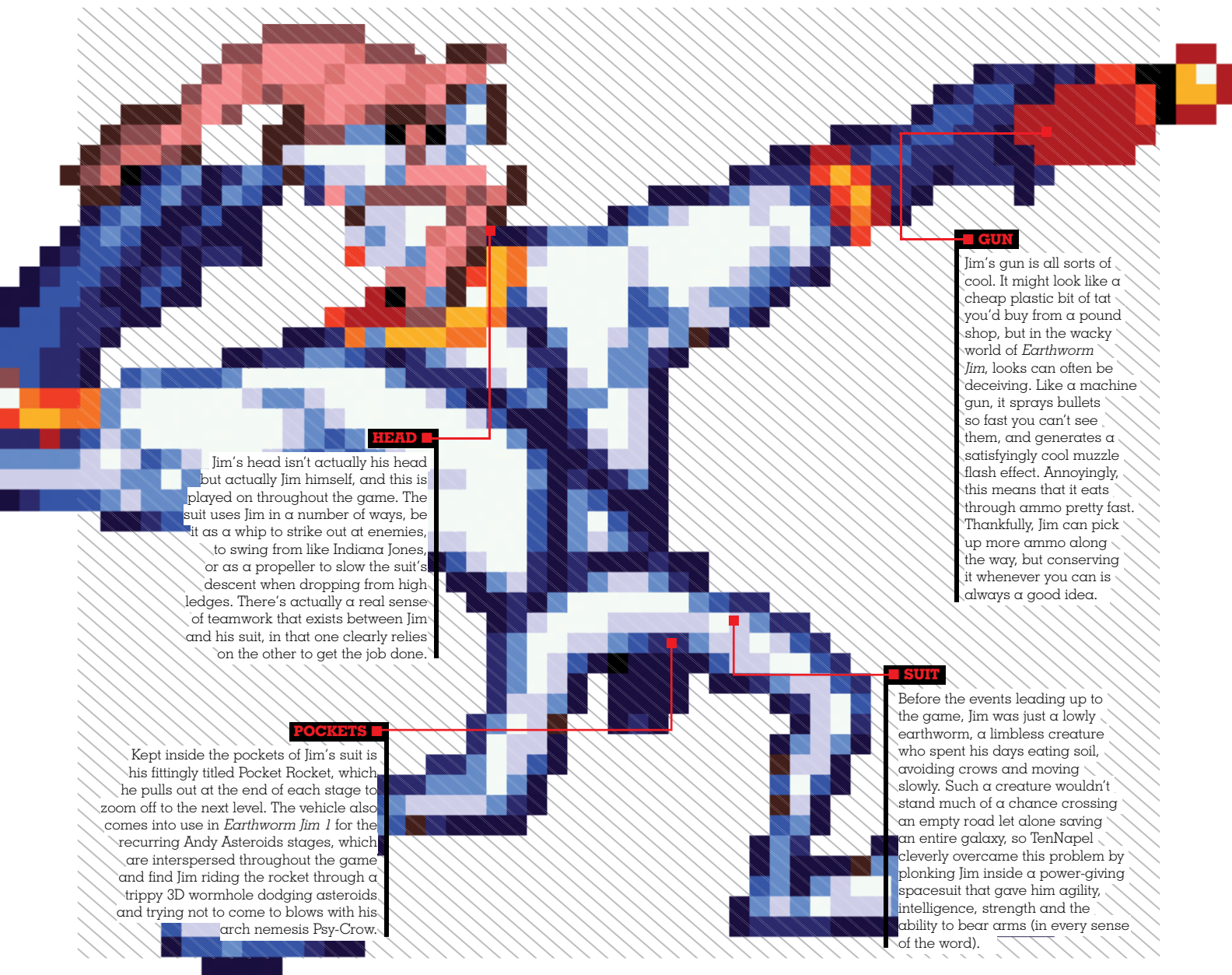


■ Interplay went all-out with the merchandising, even releasing a popular line of Jim action figures.



■ Due to a deal between Playmates and Takara, Jim popped up in *Battle Arena Toshinden* on PC.

HALL OF FAME... EARTHWORM JIM



HEAD

Jim's head isn't actually his head but actually Jim himself, and this is played on throughout the game. The suit uses Jim in a number of ways, be it as a whip to strike out at enemies, to swing from like Indiana Jones, or as a propeller to slow the suit's descent when dropping from high ledges. There's actually a real sense of teamwork that exists between Jim and his suit, in that one clearly relies on the other to get the job done.

GUN

Jim's gun is all sorts of cool. It might look like a cheap plastic bit of tat you'd buy from a pound shop, but in the wacky world of *Earthworm Jim*, looks can often be deceiving. Like a machine gun, it sprays bullets so fast you can't see them, and generates a satisfyingly cool muzzle flash effect. Annoyingly, this means that it eats through ammo pretty fast. Thankfully, Jim can pick up more ammo along the way, but conserving it whenever you can is always a good idea.

POCKETS

Kept inside the pockets of Jim's suit is his fittingly titled Pocket Rocket, which he pulls out at the end of each stage to zoom off to the next level. The vehicle also comes into use in *Earthworm Jim 1* for the recurring Andy Asteroids stages, which are interspersed throughout the game and find Jim riding the rocket through a trippy 3D wormhole dodging asteroids and trying not to come to blows with his arch nemesis Psy-Crow.

SUIT

Before the events leading up to the game, Jim was just a lowly earthworm, a limbless creature who spent his days eating soil, avoiding crows and moving slowly. Such a creature wouldn't stand much of a chance crossing an empty road let alone saving an entire galaxy, so TenNapel cleverly overcame this problem by plonking Jim inside a power-giving spacesuit that gave him agility, intelligence, strength and the ability to bear arms (in every sense of the word).



Given *Earthworm Jim*'s humour it's no surprise that the ending finishes on a comical note.



Jim cameos in the *ClayFighter* series, and is said to have a strong rivalry with Boogerman.



If Jim loses all his health you're treated to a comical death scene in which his suit explodes.



Many of the bosses in the series are memorable and, like this fire-breathing snowman, bizarre.



SOIL YOURSELF MOMENTS

WITH THEIR WONDERFUL LEVEL DESIGN, BIZARRE BOSSES, AND QUIRKY HUMOUR, THE FIRST TWO EARTHWORM JIM GAMES ARE BY FAR THE BEST IN THE SERIES. THE FRANCHISE IS KNOWN FOR FEATURING MANY MEMORABLE MOMENTS, SO WHAT BETTER WAY TO CELEBRATE JIM THAN TO DEDICATE TWO PAGES TO SOME OF HIS FUNNIEST ESCAPADES?



HAMBURGER HILL

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 2
- Which level?: Anything But Tangerines

TO GET PAST Bob the Killer Goldfish, Jim must carry a pig from its pen and then toss it down the conveniently placed Pig Chute. Doing so causes the portly porker to zip down the slide, fly into the sky and land headfirst into Bob's bowl, thus allowing Jim to continue on his merry way and complete the level.

STAIRLIFT TO HEAVEN

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 2
- Which level?: Anything But Tangerines

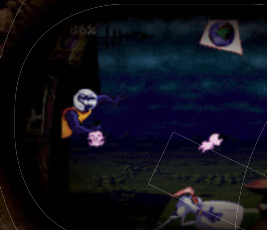
JIM HAS TO make his way up to a tall platform using the world's slowest stairlift, all while avoiding suicidal old ladies falling from the sky. Should Jim accidentally catch one of the grannies on their descent, he gets a good handbagging all the way to the bottom floor and must, annoyingly, begin his ascent all over again.



MORTAL CODBAT

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 2
- Which level?: Anything But Tangerines

IN WHAT CAN only be described as the easiest end-of-level boss in videogame history, Jim finally comes face to face with Bob the Killer Goldfish in a humorous *Mortal Kombat* parody. After the 'fight' message flashes up, Jim walks up to Bob, plucks him out of his bowl and swallows him without you having to even lift a finger.



PUPPY LOVE

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 2
- Which level?: Puppy Love

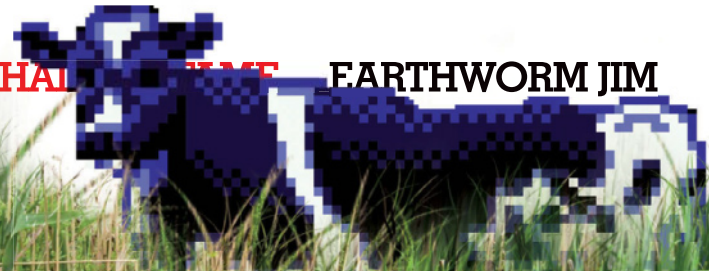
IN THIS RECURRING level, Jim has to protect Pete's young nephews who are being tossed out of a barn window by the evil Psy-Crow. A neat homage to Nintendo Game & Watch game *Fire*, it finds Jim cushioning their landings with what looks like a giant mushroom. Fail to save too many and Pete gets pretty angry and... well, let's just say you wouldn't like him when he's angry.



UNIVERSALLY CHALLENGED

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 2
- Which level?: The Villi People/Jim's Now A Blind Cave Salamander

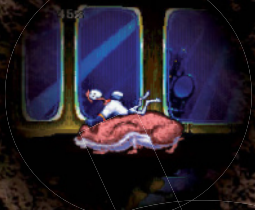
JIM, WHO IS now taking the form of a blind cave salamander (no, it's never explained), has to take part in a short quiz show and answer a series of nonsensical questions, like this one here. It's purely a guessing game and a bit fun so just hit either A, B or C and hope Lady Luck is with you.



OUTER BODY EXPERIENCE

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 1
- Which level?: What The Heck

JIM IS SEPARATED from his suit – this happens quite a lot in the games – and it really couldn't have come at a worse time. Evil the Cat, from an elevated position, is taking pot shots at our hero with his futuristic-looking rocket launcher, and there's no way for Jim to reach his suit. Or is there? The support holding up that platform looks awfully melty.



HAMSTAR

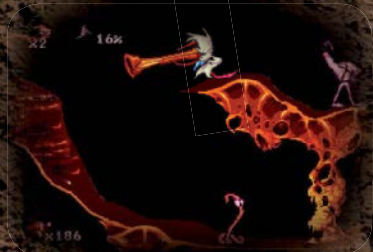
- See it in: Earthworm Jim 1
- Which level?: Down The Tubes

IN A STAGE that may have been a big influence on the look of Rapture in *BioShock*, Jim is forced to run-and-gun his way through what can only be described as an underwater hamster run. The big clue, of course, is that the stage houses a few of these critters, which Jim can use to plough through the enemies blocking his way.

THE DOGGYGUARD

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 1
- Which level?: For Pete's Sake

JIM MUST SAFELY escort Pete from one end of the stage to the next ensuring he comes to no harm. This involves whipping him into the air to prevent him from falling through gaps in the floor, and providing him with covering fire from enemies and asteroids. If Pete sustains any kind of injury, he turns into his muscular alter ego and starts chewing on Jim.



AND SO, HAVING DEFEATED THE HEFARIOUS *Cow* OUR HERO, THE *Cow* WINS BACK THE HEART OF THE LOVELY *Cow*



MILKING IT

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 2
- Which level?: See Jim Run, Run Jim Run!

THE COW JOKES continue on thick and fast through *Earthworm Jim 2*. There's a peculiar level that finds Jim carrying cows to milking stations, congratulatory screens featuring talking cows, and the game's ending too, which reveals that all the main players in the story are in fact just cows in costumes.

UDDERLY BRILLIANT

- See it in: Earthworm Jim 1
- Which level?: New Junk City

A RECURRING JOKE in Shiny Entertainment games, which was first introduced in *Earthworm Jim*, is the appearance of bovines. The first stage sees Jim launch a cow into the sky, and throughout the game it continues to make fleeting appearances in the background until finally coming to land right at the end of the game.





BEHIND THE SCENES

JET SET RADIO

Over ten years after it rolled onto the scene, Jet Set Radio is fondly remembered, yet rarely copied. What enabled the development team to create one of the most memorable games of the Dreamcast era?



Released: 2000

Format: Dreamcast

Publisher: Sega

Developer: Smilebit

KEY STAFF:

Masayoshi Kikuchi Director
Ryuta Ueda Art Director
Osamu Sato Producer
Hideki Naganuma Composer

TEN YEARS CAN be a long time. Ten years was enough time for Sega launch the Dreamcast, only to see it die a premature death and retire from manufacturing hardware altogether, and ten years was long enough to enshrine a select group of those Dreamcast games as timeless classics. But ten years can also be a short time. For those who remember it, *Jet Set Radio* was so hip, so innovative, and has barely been copied or rivalled since, that it's easy to look back a decade and think, 'Wow, was that really ten years ago? It seems like it was only yesterday.'

It was over a decade ago that Masayoshi Kikuchi led a small team of less than 25 people, with an average age of under 25, in the creation of what would become one of the Dreamcast's many classics. Kikuchi, along with *JSR* art director Ryuta Ueda, had just finished making *Panzer Dragoon Saga* for the Saturn before he got to work on *JSR*. After such a hardcore fantasy title, the team was eager to try its hand at something new. After all, dragons had been done before *Panzer Dragoon*, and they would be done after. "We wanted to work on something that was completely unlike *Panzer Dragoon Saga*. Something dealing with pop culture and something that was cool," says Kikuchi.

"Games like *Panzer* are really for hardcore gaming types. At the time, there weren't any games that had pop culture in them," Ueda adds. Ryuta Ueda had been drawing characters that resembled the end-look of *JSR* since his days in art school, as Kikuchi explains. "Ueda came and showed me this picture saying, 'Let's do this, let's do something like this.'" So the young team wasn't brought into a creative atmosphere; they created it themselves and resolved to make a game like none that had come before.

"We were a young team, with little experience. There was no one to tell us what was good or bad. We went off and did what we wanted **CONTINUED >**



■ US release *Jet Grind Radio* enabled users to share graffiti tags over SegaNet.



WE WERE A YOUNG TEAM, WITH LITTLE EXPERIENCE; WE DID WHAT WE WANTED



BEHIND THE SCENES JET SET RADIO



■ Sega renewed its US trademark on the *Jet Set Radio* license in 2009, prompting speculation from fans of a new instalment.

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:

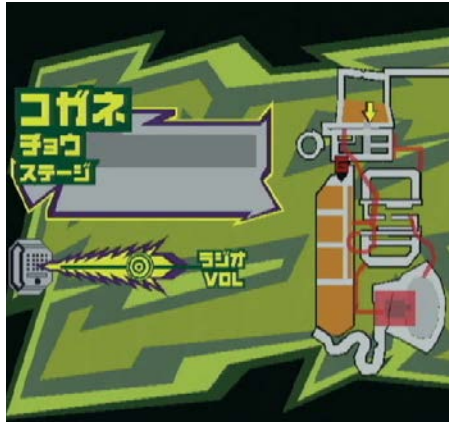
SHADOWMAN

▲ *Jet Set Radio* was a game that I initially had no interest in, so my brother got it instead. I borrowed it off him one day when he was at football, to see what the fuss was about, and to this day I still haven't given it back! I love the slick and stylish graphics (which at the time I hadn't seen anything quite like), the fantastic soundtrack and, of course, the insanely addictive gameplay – especially when aiming for the highest ranks.

Posted by:

MR MARVELLOUS

▲ I remember paying £70 for it on import; it was worth every penny. One of, if not the best Dreamcast games. Let's hope it's part of Sega's XBLA plans.



Posted by:

DIFFERENTCLASS

▲ Right, in this game you can grind on a rail 50 feet in the air at high speed, leap another 10 feet in the air doing a 540-degree spin, also while spraying your tag on the cockpit window of a helicopter containing 'the man', and land on another stretch of rail while said chopper crashes into a billboard. All to that soundtrack. Love it.

Posted by:

THE INQUISITOR

▲ While the pioneering cel-shaded graphics and suitably diverse soundtrack were revolutionary at the time (and still great), I'd like to point out a much forgotten feature which I had never experienced on a console before. You could design your own graffiti art to use in-game, and then upload your design online and, in turn, download other aspiring artists' work, to use when making the streets more colourful. It added to the feeling of an underground community spirit that the game had running through its veins.

■ Characters like those in *Jet Set Radio* had been filling Ueda's sketchbook since his days as an art student.





WHAT THEY SAID...



It's always nice when a title appears that's new, fresh and exciting. Like lots of other Sega games before it, *Jet Set Radio* is one of those games. There really is nothing else like it

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to do." That's not to say that the team operated without inspiration. It drew on other games that aspired to escape the confines of the fantasy/sci-fi offerings of the time, and thrived on competition from others who were trying to do the same. Ueda describes his experience at Tokyo Game Show 1996: "When I saw *PaRappa The Rapper* at TGS... I think that's the first game with pop culture like that. They did it first. After that I decided to make a true game, not just a visual experience, that was actually for adults."

If *Jet Set Radio* was such an original experience, where did the idea come from? Ueda and Kikuchi wanted to make a game for adults, but how did anyone even know what that meant at the start of the Dreamcast era? Ueda's art, which looks very similar to the Japanese package art, was the start, and Kikuchi says he developed the atmosphere of the game based on that. They both shared the image of a punky kind of character with headphones, sliding in and out between people on rollerblades in a crowded town. The anti-establishment themes of *Fight Club*, recently released in cinemas at the time, proved to be a large influence as well.

■ ■ ■ WHEN ALL WAS said and done, the team had a collection of ideas and concepts. The final idea was to produce a game that combined pop culture, street culture, Ueda's art, graffiti, punks, *Fight Club* and an open world. However, once they had a starting point, they faced another issue: how to take vague concepts and art and make a game out of them.

"We knew from the start we wanted to make an action game, but we wanted to make a kind of action game that had never been seen before," says Kikuchi. It seems that since *JSR* was different from everything that came before; once the core concepts were integrated into the art or gameplay, they didn't

change. From concept to final product, *Jet Set Radio* was a game of a single and unchanging vision.

The fact that things didn't change doesn't mean that development was an easy process. "I don't remember the bad stuff," says Ueda when we ask him about the challenges the team faced during the game's remarkably short ten-month development cycle. The most challenging concept to bring to fruition on the Dreamcast is one that gamers take for granted now – the open world of the game. At the time, the phrase 'open-world game' didn't even exist but, according to Ueda, "It was one of the first games with a town you could play in." He acknowledges that *Super Mario 64* was the first truly open world, but claims that *Shenmue* was different because the player couldn't jump. "Making an entire town in a game was quite the prospect. It's not hard with modern hi-spec hardware, but that wasn't the case back then... It was very difficult from a programming standpoint," Kikuchi explains.

The challenges went beyond the technical. Integrating Kikuchi's gameplay vision with the open world also created issues with control. "As the characters' speed picked up, control became more difficult because it wasn't like Sonic, who can go in

WITH THESE CHARACTERS AND THIS ART, WE HAD TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

a straight line. The game world was an actual town, not a box, so there were lots of objects lying around for the player to crash into. Those obstacles made going fast stressful, not fun." The sense of speed was incredibly important because, until that point, there hadn't yet been a 3D action game that demanded speed. It was going to be a major selling point of the game.

Skating fast in an empty box is boring, but objects in the world make it frustrating. It sounds like an insurmountable challenge, but Kikuchi says the final decision was to use grinding to blend obstacle-free speed with the object-filled world. While grinding, players could enjoy an almost Sonic-like velocity, but

■ The game came with a vandalism warning. We wonder how many young up-and-coming street artists this game actually inspired.

Graffiti is art. However, graffiti as an act of vandalism is a crime. Every state/province has vandalism laws that apply to graffiti, and local entities such as cities and counties have anti-graffiti ordinances.

Violation of these laws can result in a fine, probation, or a jail sentence.

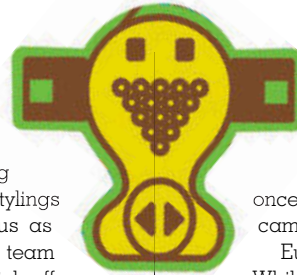
SEGA does not condone the real life act of vandalism in any form.

BEHIND THE SCENES JET SET RADIO



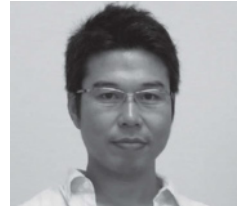
they still had to worry about the game world around them when they jumped off the rail.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of *Jet Set Radio* was its pioneering cel-shaded art style. While cartoon stylings would eventually become as ubiquitous as Photoshop lens flares, at the time the team wasn't even sure they could pull the trick off. "With these characters and this art, we had to do something different," says Ueda, explaining that the team's eventual decision to cel-shade the game wasn't a forgone conclusion, they just knew the game couldn't look like anything else on the market. "We couldn't do polygons that looked like his art," explains Kikuchi. While they knew how to make images that looked like Ueda's drawings with the kind of powerful computers used for CG rendering, they weren't sure it was possible on the comparatively weak Dreamcast hardware. "Cel-shading was a result of thinking hard about how to make Ueda's art come alive with polygons. We needed shading without gradations."



English speakers, Ueda and Kikuchi couldn't explain the change. Maybe the US PR team wanted to emphasise the grind mechanic. Whatever the reason, the series name was unified once the Xbox sequel *Jet Set Radio Future* came out.

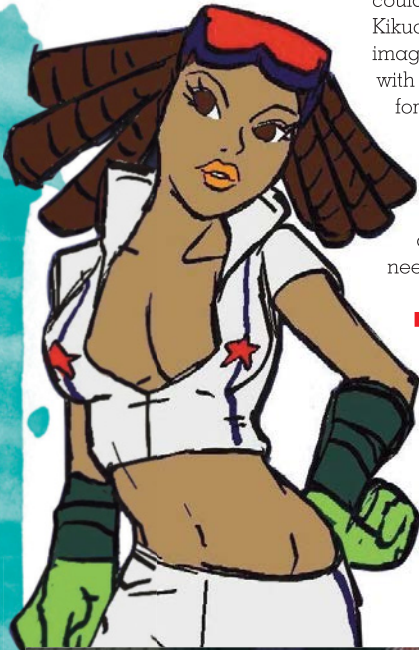
Europe didn't escape changes, either. While the name stayed intact, several changes were made to the game itself. Kikuchi said that the town in which the game takes place was very Japanese, and indeed it is. Playing the game immediately brings to mind the Tokyo fashion and shopping Mecca of Shibuya, a place that any Japanese player would instantly be familiar with, just as any British gamer would be familiar with Piccadilly Circus. In an attempt to help give non-Japanese players that same sense of familiarity, Kikuchi and his team added American-style environments modelled after New York's Times Square and the south Bronx. They also made small changes to the story, like changing the nationality of two of the characters to American.



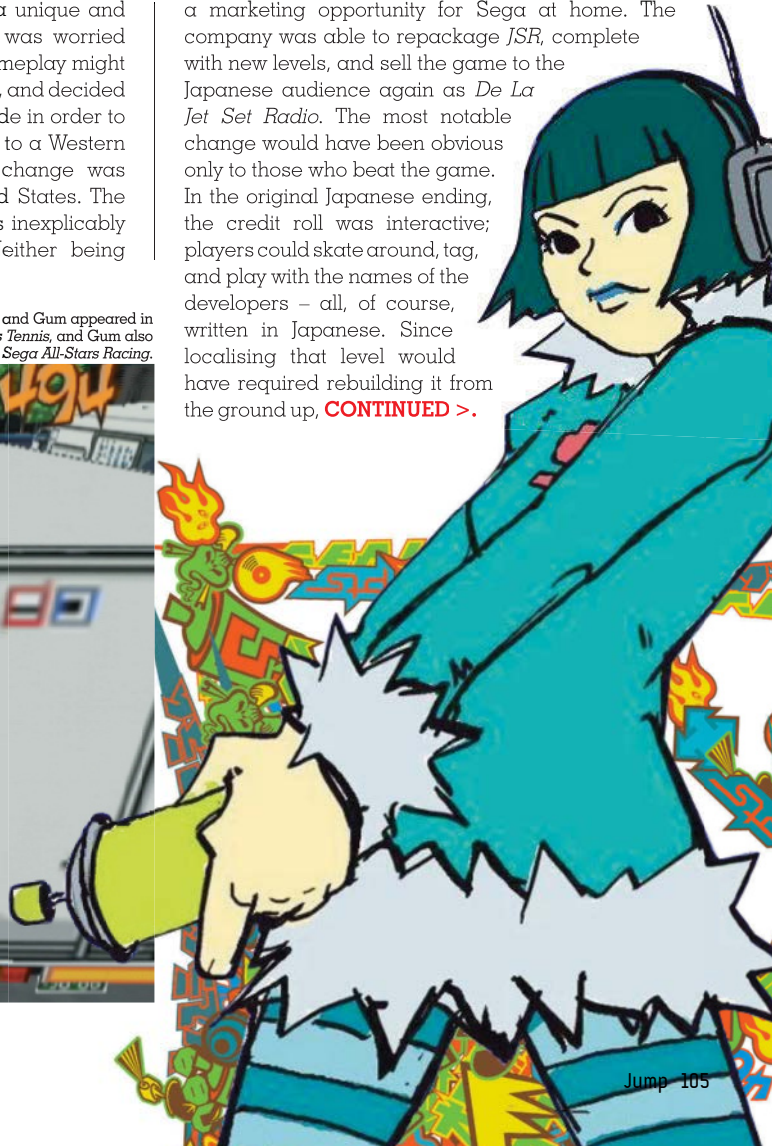
MASAYOSHI KIKUCHI
Director

■■■ THE CEL ART combined with Ueda's style to give the game a unique and very Japanese look. But Sega was worried that this unique art style and gameplay might alienate players outside of Japan, and decided that a few changes had to be made in order to make the game more palatable to a Western audience. The most obvious change was implemented only for the United States. The familiar name *Jet Set Radio* was inexplicably changed to *Jet Grind Radio*. Neither being

These additional levels also created a marketing opportunity for Sega at home. The company was able to repackage *JSR*, complete with new levels, and sell the game to the Japanese audience again as *De La Jet Set Radio*. The most notable change would have been obvious only to those who beat the game. In the original Japanese ending, the credit roll was interactive; players could skate around, tag, and play with the names of the developers – all, of course, written in Japanese. Since localising that level would have required rebuilding it from the ground up, **CONTINUED >**



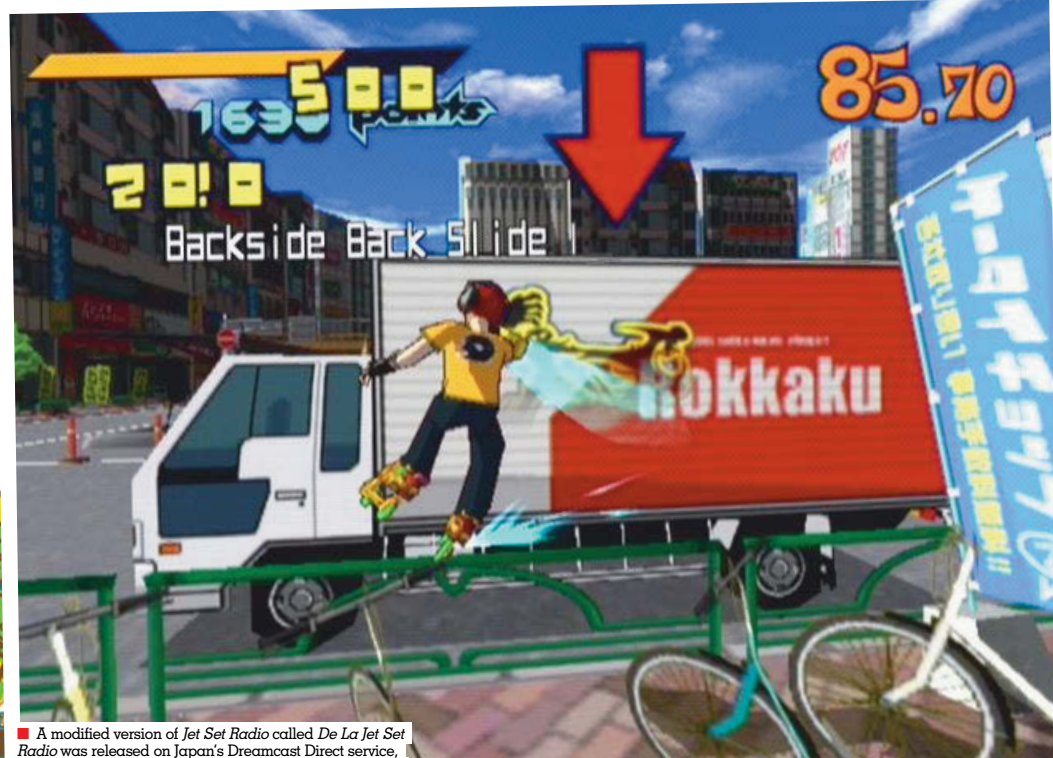
■ Characters Beat and Gum appeared in *Sega Superstars Tennis*, and Gum also popped up in *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*.



WHY NO SEQUEL?

■ FOR A GAME that's so fondly remembered and influential to have only one sequel is uncommon in the videogame industry. We got the impression during our interview that the reasons have more to do with the higher-ups at Sega than a lack of desire for a sequel. We were greeted by nervous laughter when we pointed out that there was "*Jet Set Radio*, then *Future*, then nothing." It's apparent that the entire team wasn't happy with the decision, a certain member responding under his breath, "Sega..." before mumbling something else under his breath. He obviously wasn't happy with the decision.

However, there are several valid reasons the series ended where it did. "We wanted to do something different. For a year or two afterwards, we were on different arcade or action adventure titles... Then, after we proved we could make a town, we wanted to make a game that had human drama in it," says Ueda, referring to the *Yakuza* series. He continues: "The Dreamcast, being our own hardware, allowed us to experiment with lots of things. Now, we have to think, 'Hmmm... will this sell?... Games like this are pretty expensive to make.'"



■ A modified version of *Jet Set Radio* called *De La Jet Set Radio* was released on Japan's Dreamcast Direct service, featuring additional levels and music from the PAL game.

this time with every credited individual's name written in English, the sequence was cut in its entirety.

Not everyone was happy about these changes. Ueda's pride, both national and personal, was wrapped up in the Japanese style and nature of *JSR*. He felt the team had made an amazing game that showed off the cool and hip side of Japanese culture to the world. Adding levels based on foreign locales was watering down the essential 'Japanese-ness' of the game. All the while, he admits to thinking about the possibilities of new levels. "While I was against it, at the same time I was protesting. I kept on thinking, 'What if we did add new levels - what would I do?'" Ueda couldn't stop thinking about it, and the longer he did, the more elaborate his plans became. Eventually it was decided, and the team created the new stages.

■■■ DESPITE THESE NUMEROUS changes, the game's memorable soundtrack, composed by Hideki Naganuma, stayed intact, albeit with the addition of licensed tracks from the likes of Jurassic 5 and Mixmaster Mike, plus new tracks from *Sonic R* maestro Richard Jacques. Despite being the same age as Ueda and Kikuchi, and thus part of the

same cohort (an incredibly important relationship in Japanese business and culture), Naganuma has since left Sega. When Ueda and Kikuchi speak of him and his role on *JSR*, one gets the feeling that they viewed themselves as a part of a trio that helped shape the game and eventually its legacy. That word,

WE WANTED TO MAKE A KIND OF ACTION GAME THAT HAD NEVER BEEN SEEN BEFORE

legacy, draws laughs from Ueda when we first uses it in our interview. Ueda and Kikuchi aren't really sure that the game has something that deserves the word 'legacy', even to the extent that the game's original success surprised them. While they're very proud of the game and the fanbase it created, they're not sure *JSR* influenced other games, with the exception of Sega's own *Yakuza* series. While both of them suggest there are games incorporating grinding or certain art styles that may be influenced

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



The appearance of PaRappa The Rapper on PSOne hardened the *Jet Set Radio* team's resolve to make a truly original pop-culture-infused game.



Getting Up was one of the few games that borrowed *JSR*'s graffiti mechanic, resulting in it getting banned in Australia.



by *JSR*, they're not convinced that such an influence actually exists, but would be happy if it did. Whether such humility is honest, or merely symptomatic of the kind of self-effacement that's expected in Japanese society, we can't say. However, Ueda does mention that other developers, non-Japanese developers in particular, often tell him, 'I love *Jet Set*.' Such respect from foreign development houses resulted in Ueda being invited to the Nordic Game conference in Denmark.

■■■■ KIKUCHI AND UEDA have constantly kept the game fresh in people's memories by inserting references into other games, particularly in the *Yakuza* series, which Ueda jokes, "is in the same universe as *JSR*, like the Marvel or DC universes." The last boss of *JSR* can be found in a public restroom in the first *Yakuza* game, begging for toilet paper, "See, right there. The same universe," Ueda points out.

Bringing up the various elements that he left scattered throughout the games he's worked on brings out an excitement rarely seen in the usually calm Ueda. However, he lets Kikuchi explain most of the influences. "See this?" he asks, pointing towards a portrait of the character Garam in the *JSR* manual. "See his necklace? It's a skull, and while we were working on *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, I found it on the



stomach of one of the bosses. It's a strange shape, isn't it? I asked Mr. Ueda what it was, and he told me that it's the skull of another famous Sega character"

While we wouldn't hold our breath for a sequel (see *Why No Sequel?*) there is a glimmer of hope for those who would like to see *JSR* make a return. We asked the two developers point-blank whether we could look forward to playing the game on XBLA, PSN, or some other downloadable game service, and at first they weren't forthcoming. Kikuchi simply told us "maybe." But no sooner had the word left his mouth than a wry smile crossed his face and Ueda burst out laughing. He pointed towards Kikuchi and said, "Look at his face, his nose gets longer when he says 'maybe.'"

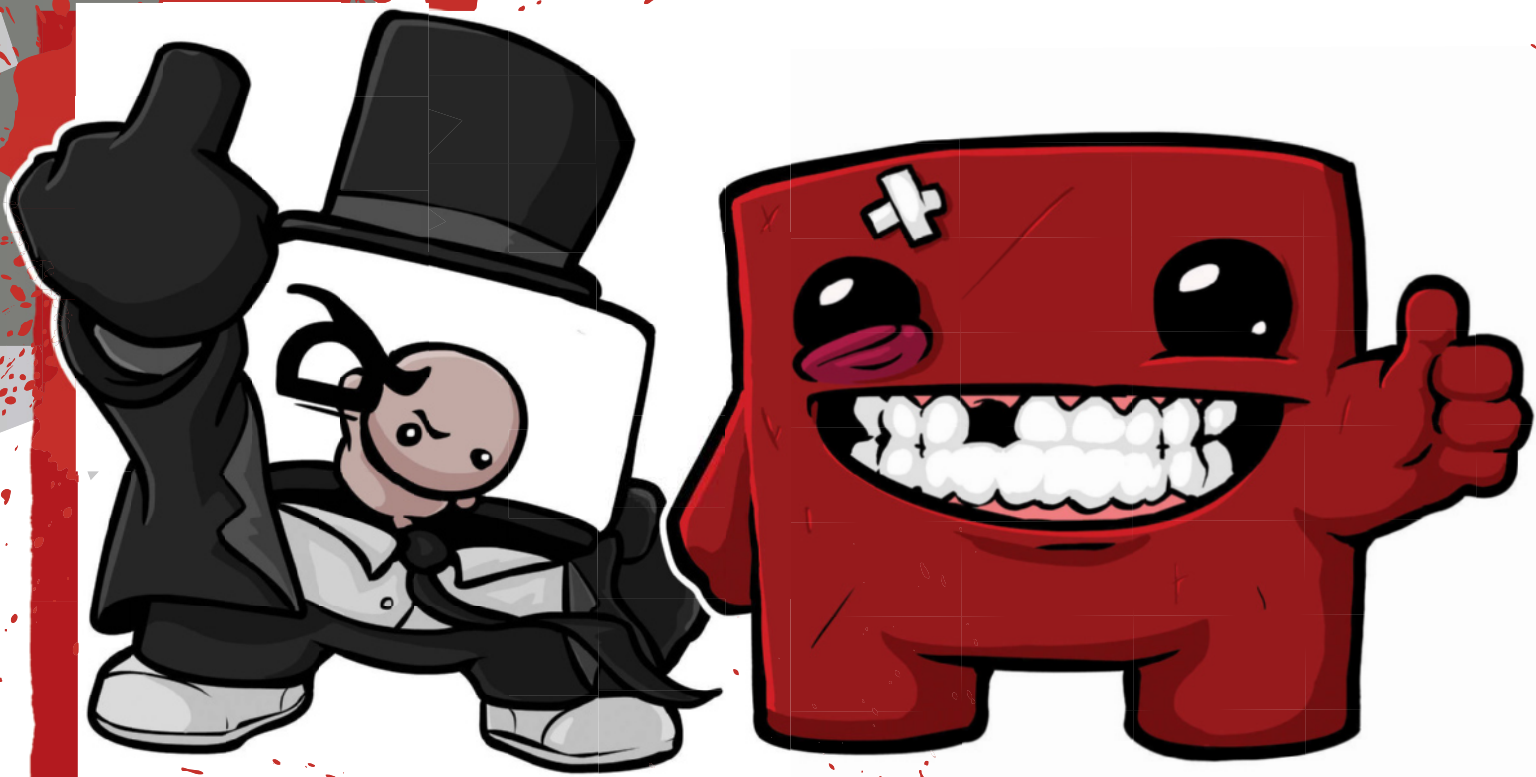
If that isn't confirmation enough for you, a recently leaked screenshot from what appears to be a French language version of Xbox Live Arcade (or PartnerNet, Microsoft's XBLA test bed), shows *Jet Set Radio* as a playable game. Fans aren't going to get their long-awaited sequel, but Xbox owners will likely get an upscaled, HD *JSR*.

As much as we would like to see a sequel, there are far more ignoble fates for a beloved series, something that Sega fans are well aware of. Perhaps it's for the best that *JSR* be left alone. Kikuchi seems content to work on the *Yakuza* series, and it looks like he's bringing a certain brand of Dreamcast-era Sega craziness to the next (zombie-filled) entry in the traditionally serious series, *Yakuza: Of The End*. We'd love to see a hi-def outing for Beat and crew, but the heart of the series lives on in other Sega titles.



■ Grinding worked much as it had in the *Sonic Adventure* games. Except here its inclusion made more sense.





TEAM MEAT

THE GUYS BEHIND THE HUGELY SUCCESSFUL SUPER MEAT BOY ARE BACK, NOW WITH INFINITE CATS. **GAMEST™** CATCHES UP WITH THE INDIE DUO TO DISCUSS NEW PROJECTS, THE INDUSTRY TODAY, AND CREATIVE INTEGRITY

One of the strangest things about the games industry today is how the same number can have totally different meanings based on the title it is applied to. It's all a matter of perspective, you see. One million sales for, say, a new *Call Of Duty* or *Assassin's Creed* game would likely be conservative day-one estimates rather than lifetime expectations – with millions

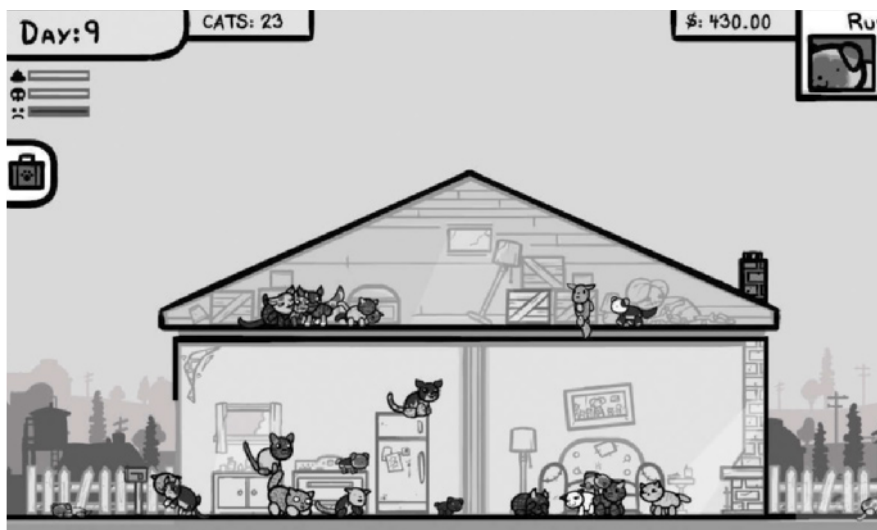
of dollars, thousands of hours and hundreds of people working on big-budget titles, one million just isn't enough. Hell, even five or six sometimes isn't enough. But when it comes to a downloadable game created by a team of two, one million is an incredible milestone – that represents a sales-to-staff ratio that something like *ACIV* would need to sell well over 250 million copies to match. In the

indie world, one million is still huge and it's one that brutal platformer *Super Meat Boy* soared past in just over a year on sale, despite being one of the most sadistic videogames ever created.

"The environment has changed – the rules have changed," explains Team Meat's talkative artist, Edmund McMillen. "Videogames have changed drastically over the years and I think the reason why



■ **Right:** *Mew-Genics!* might look cute and cuddly but beneath all the fluff, there's a hell of a lot of clever stuff going on. **Above:** Just avoid all the deadly blades and get to Bandage Girl as quickly as possible. How hard can it be, right? Oh. Oh dear.



Mario and *Ghosts 'N' Goblins* and all those games were so difficult back then and that their design was more frustrating than difficult was that all those people had previously developed for back then was arcade. And that's all about getting as many quarters as you can from the player, so the penalty was really high - that's how you made money. Coming out of the arcade generation to the home console generation, the difficulty came through but frustration factor grew immensely - you couldn't just pump more quarters in to get more credits. With *Meat Boy*, we designed around the way things had changed. We took the penalty down to zero but kept the difficulty really high. In fact, we could push the difficulty much higher because of that reduced penalty and frustration."

Punishing it may be, but nail one of *Meat Boy*'s devious obstacle courses and the sense of achievement is overwhelming. It's crazy to discover, in fact, that the glorious post-stage replay feature (where all your failed attempts play out at the same time) was a bit of coding improvisation on the part of Team Meat's technical wizard, Tommy Refenes. "There was a video of a hacked SNES emulator where this guy was playing *Super Mario World*," he recalls. "It would take all of his recordings and layer them over one another and I was like, 'Oh, I could do that in real time!', so we did. It was just a neat thing, and a good reward too." Such on-the-fly additions and improvisations seem to be an integral part of Team Meat's approach to development, in fact. "Yeah, I think that's kind of our philosophy - it's certainly mine," nods McMillen. "And I think that philosophy is the reason why *Mew-Genics!* has taken a year. We thought we'd be done within a year but we're on one year of development and still have a way to go. That could be because I tend to improvise as I design, but it's harder to do so when you're working on a game that's open-ended. You add something and it balloons into something else - that's definitely something I do, something we have done and something that's both awesome and awful."

"WE DIDN'T NAME OURSELVES. WE WERE JUST GIVEN THE NAME BY NINTENDO IN A RANDOM PRESS RELEASE"

This approach is something only indies really have the luxury of employing, as McMillen goes on to explain. "When you have a company and have a million different people doing a million different things and have to have somebody to keep them all on track, you can't come in one day and be all, like, 'Hey, can we make it so the cats eat their own shit?' That's not in the original design document - it's gonna cause a ton of problems because it'd have to go through all these different pockets and teams that would have to get together and agree upon it. But with us, it's just like 'Yeah, we can probably do that - that'll add a lot more, so let's do that.' We have that freedom to do whatever would be fun or cool and I think the majority of what happened with *Meat Boy* and what's happening now with *Mew-Genics!*

revolves around that. We'll just get these wild ideas to do something crazy because it might be fun. And we do it." Refenes interjects. "You realise that we're the only people in the history of time that have said 'It would be really cool if the cats ate their own shit', right?" he asks, although McMillen's answer is typically confident. "I like to think that is innovation," he laughs.

We're also surprised to learn that the duo's appropriate moniker wasn't an in-house creation. "We didn't name ourselves," reveals McMillen in a strange tangent. "We were just given the name by Nintendo in a random press release and we were just like, 'Yeah, okay.' Somebody asked what the names were that we thought of before and we realised that we never talked about it! We never discussed anything - we just became Team Meat. I think it's fine - it works. I mean, it's kind of an honour, right?" With *Meat Boy*'s no-show on a Nintendo platform and contractual obligations with Microsoft meaning that he couldn't appear on PSN either, Team Meat is yet to make much of an impact on the console market. But even now, with that new console smell still fresh in the air following two huge new launches, the duo doesn't seem all that interested in consoles. »

MEET TOMMY

"HI, I'M TOMMY AND I BRING THE PROGRAMMING..."



■ **TOMMY REFENES**, the technical mastermind behind the 1s and 0s that make *Super Meat Boy* work, started out in server and website coding in 2001, before moving into games in 2005. He joined Streamline Studios that year, assisting in porting the Unreal engine from Xbox to 360 as well as working on WiiWare title *HoopWorld*. In 2006, he founded studio Pillowfort with game designer Aubrey Hesselgren - its debut title, *Goal*, was cancelled. Refenes also developed several iOS games around the end of the decade, with *Zits & Giggles* being pulled from the App Store after Refenes made some less than complimentary comments about Apple's

storefront at GDC 2010, comparing its games to the Tiger handhelds of old - games sold on names and brands rather than gameplay. Refenes made some similarly incendiary comments in *Indie Game: The Movie*, including describing games like *Halo* as 'shit'. "I don't like 'em. It's a personal opinion," he elaborates. "I don't like the games. I'm not good at the games. The work that goes into them is amazing and anybody that works on them should be proud, but I don't like them. I also don't like Katy Perry. I don't really like a lot of news sites, and I don't like your kid's drawings. You can be proud of them but I think they suck. That's just me, I'm sorry!"

KEY TITLES

■ *Grey Matter* (2008) ■ *Beat! Music Memory Match* (2009) ■ *HoopWorld* (2010)



■ Left: Retro game and pop culture references were everywhere in *Super Meat Boy*. We're expecting *Mew-Genics!* to do the same. Below: *Meat Boy* is still coming to iOS, but it's been put on hold while the duo finishes *Mew-Genics!*



MEET EDMUND

"HI, I'M EDMUND AND I BRING THE DESIGN AND DOODLES..."



■ AN ARTIST WORKING out of Santa Cruz, California, Edmund McMillen has been creating games for over a decade, having started out as an indie comic artist. McMillen was the original artist and animator on *Braid* before David Hellman took over for the final version, but today he's better known for his own titles. Team Meat might only have a single game to its name until *Mew-Genics!* launches but McMillen has released 16 titles, most of which have been Flash games – the list includes award winners and nominees such as *Gish*, *Aether* and the original version of *Meat Boy*, which has

since been played by millions on sites like Newgrounds where fellow indie codehouse The Behemoth also shot to fame with *Alien Hominid*. McMillen is open about his motivations, no surprise to anyone who saw him open up for the camera in *Indie Game: The Movie*. "I think it's hard to make art without being honest and the easiest way to be honest with art is to go with what you know," he tells us. "And the thing you know the best is usually yourself. I don't think I'll ever make a game where I'm not basing some aspect of it on something I've experienced or enjoyed."

KEY TITLES

■ *Gish* (2004) ■ *Aether* (2008) ■ *Meat Boy* (2008)

» "We're at a weird point overall," muses McMillen. "I've never cared so little about an iteration or generation of consoles before in my life, and I was such a huge videogame and console fanboy. I went to the launch of pretty much every big console that there's been for ages and worked at Gamestop for a really long time but after the Wii, it all just kinda fell apart. It's come down to the fact that it's not the consoles – it's just the games. There's really not that much interesting out there. We'd like to work with Nintendo. We've tried to make it happen multiple times and they've done a great job in aiding that."

"But in the end, things just got messed up and we couldn't do stuff. It'd be an honour to be featured on a Nintendo console but at this point, their current console is not necessarily one to take a risk and develop for. 3DS is cool though, right?" Refenes drops another logic bomb. "But still, why kill yourself for that when you could just put it on Steam or the App Store and not have to worry about *anything*? Why do that?" he asks. "It's come down to that," McMillen agrees. "The console wars are... I don't know... what's an analogy for something that's barely a war? It's like a bunch of old people that have been at odds in a nursing home and they just don't talk to each other any more." Refenes steps in for the punchline. "They're just waiting for the first one to die," he laughs.

That said, the pair seem receptive to the indie-friendly new policies put in place by platform holders like Sony, even if there are apparently new potential problems to face there. "I think it'll definitely make it more interesting," says McMillen. "I don't know that it'll be a lucrative thing, though. I always question that – I wonder if it'll be a worthwhile thing for Sony to do. I really want it to be, of course. I didn't care at all about my Vita until *Spelunky* came out on it. More indie games on the platform – yes, amazing, great. But unless they're exclusive to the platform, why don't I just play it on Steam, where I can eventually buy it for 80 per cent off?" It's a sentiment clearly echoed in the studio's fan base too, with the PC version of *Super Meat Boy* vastly outgassing its console counterpart.

"Especially now, it's really quite a double-edged sword," adds Refenes. "Because Sony is so open about it, they're not going to demand exclusivity. So what's going to happen is – especially given that the PS4 architecture is very similar to PC – that a PC version of some PS4 game isn't that much of a stretch any more."

That single mention of *Spelunky* is enough to set the two off, Refenes regaling us with tales of his underground exploits amassed through hundreds of hours of play time. "It's a really entertaining game but I don't think it's any harder than *Mario*, realistically," McMillen adds. "But sometimes it does fuck you over and there's that luck-based element to it. But you can also just get really lucky and get a jetpack and blow through the whole level."

Conversation turns to *Spelunky*'s random generation, something also seen in McMillen's own *The Binding Of Isaac*. "I think random generation is the new arcade formula for games – a new way to get people constantly replaying," he states. "But

"THE CONSOLE WARS ARE LIKE A BUNCH OF OLD PEOPLE AT ODDS IN A NURSING HOME"

instead of playing for the high score, they're playing for the enjoyment factor of the new experience every time. It kind of goes hand in hand with the way we design – our improvised

design with this improvised gameplay. I wouldn't say it's the future of games but I would say that it's a good... I don't know if it's a genre or what but it's a new rough design architecture that you can design games around and just make them endless, like an arcade experience again in a way."

That's one popular trend that the duo clearly approve of, then, but there's another that doesn't get nearly as warm a reception when it comes up – microtransactions. "If *Spelunky* let you put in a dollar to buy the jetpack on the first level, they would be millionaires!" laughs McMillen. "But it'd cheapen the experience and ruin the game. There are two things with videogames and those two things are business and art. In the mainstream, it really leans towards business. In some ways, when you go into *FarmVille*



THE DNA OF MEW-GENICS!

TEAM MEAT'S NEW PROJECT DRAWS INSPIRATION FROM AND PAYS HOMAGE TO ALL CORNERS OF GAMING. HERE ARE A FEW OF THE LINKS WE'VE MANAGED TO PICK OUT SO FAR, BUT THERE ARE BOUND TO BE COUNTLESS MORE...

POKÉMON



BREED, COLLECT, TRAIN, battle, evolve... many of the buzz words used in describing *Mew-Genics!* evoke Nintendo's monster franchise. Team Meat has simplified the concept to be about a single species, sure, but there's a depth and complexity here that goes way beyond *Pokémon's* often-annoying RNG antics. Level up your purpose-trained cats, send them into battle or ship them off to pet shows – what you do and how you play is entirely up to you, so you're free to be a battler, a breeder, a hoarder, a boffin or whatever you like. Hopefully we'll be able to teach Mr Tiddles to use Earthquake, too...

THE SIMS



EARNING ENOUGH TO pimp out your house is pretty much the entire goal of EA's life sim but here, it's only the beginning. Furniture plays a major part in the development of your cats, sometimes to the point of having life-changing effects – a particularly fancy dresser might suddenly start turning your cats glamorous, for instance, while the armchair where an old cat died might make others inconsolable. Breeding, evolution and mutation are huge factors in how a cat turns out, sure, but nurture is almost as important as nature – your choice of coffee table has never been so important.

SPORE

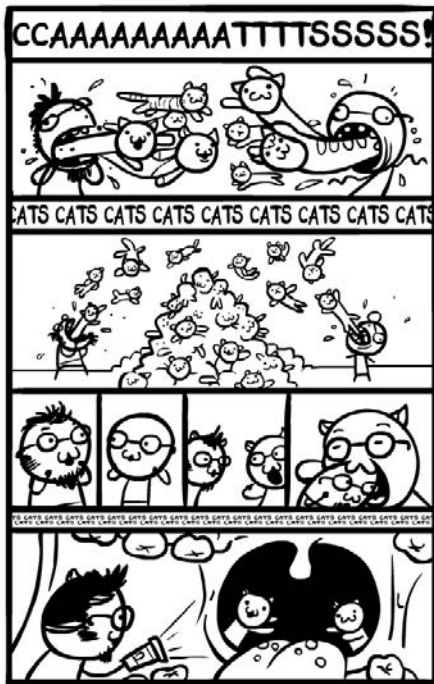


WILL WRIGHT'S EVOLUTION sim was arguably a better concept than it was a game, but some of its clever DNA witchcraft lives on in *Mew-Genics!* – cats all have their own stats, traits, ailments, with offspring generated based on the details of the parents. In addition, how your kitties are raised can have an effect: some of these are temporary, others apply to a single cat while still more can be passed down. It's all very complex and very clever, but Team Meat has already done all the hard work – you just need to shove cats together until you get one with the stats you're after.

GRAN TURISMO



IF YOU'VE PUT enough time into any of Polyphony's racers to expand your garage to a ludicrous size, you'll know all about the thrill of hoarding. A typical end-game *GT* garage is filled with more cars than you could possibly ever need – apply that same logic to cats and you're on the right track here. Although each new cat is unique, favourites can be cryogenically frozen and their DNA tinkered with, allowing you to (hopefully) reproduce at least some aspect of them down the line. If your house isn't already too full of cats and tat by that point, anyway.



■ Left: McMillen produces loads of comics and original doodles for the Team Meat blog – keep it bookmarked for all kinds of silliness, most of it cat related. Above: Options will be limited when starting out in *Mew-Genics!*, but expect the house to fill up with cats, crap, and cat crap fairly quickly.

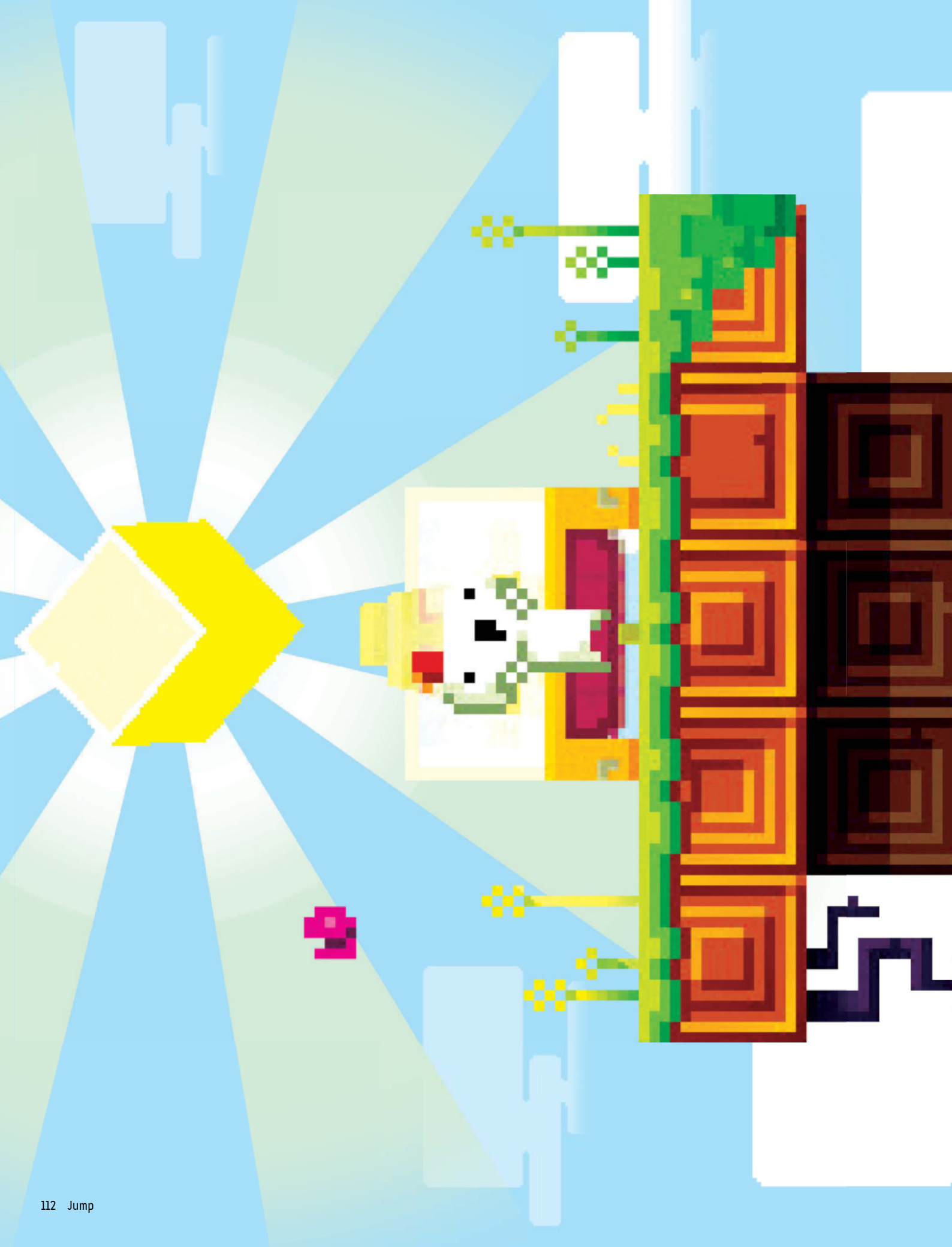
or whatever the most abusive, manipulative, money-grabbing microtransaction game out there may be, that is a 100 per cent business model – that has nothing to do with videogames. It's just manipulating people into handing over money. It's not a game – there's no art there. They're just using the illusion of a game and they're just gonna juice you with this business. But yeah, I think when you're making a game, you have to have integrity when it comes to design and the art of designing a game. You can't venture too far into the business side of things without completely tainting what you're doing."

Refenes takes the point a step further. "It works the same way if you try to appease everybody. 'We're going

to take this out of our game because some people found it offensive'... I know there was one zombie game where they shot kids or something and I think there was an uproar but I don't think they changed it – their game was a free game and they just said 'You don't have to play it'. But then there are other developers who, if somebody gets upset about something, feel the need to just pull it because they don't want to offend or whatever. But it's the same sort of thing – they might as well just start throwing microtransactions in there and try and make a shitload of money out of manipulating people because all they're doing is compromising what they wanted to do in the first place." And McMillen's agreement comes with a warning to other developers.

"It's very easy to self-censor or just turn your game into a turd by trying to appeal to everyone and worry about the money that you'll eventually make and how to maximise that," he says. "When we all got into this, every year at GDC there were tons of 'how to monetise your game' things going on. And I realise that there are a large number of people who are purely in this for profit and don't really give a shit about anything else, and that's fine. But if you set out to make something that's artful or to push game design in a positive direction, don't lie to yourself and think that you're doing anything good by compromising your vision or monetising your game because you need a few extra bucks. Your game's gonna suffer."





Keeping Perspective

Phil Fish is the lead designer of developer Polytron's upcoming XBLA pixel art platformer, *Fez* — a game with a development history almost as twisted and Escher-like as its plane-warping gameplay. *Games™* sits down with Fish to catch up and learn more about the trials and tribulations of an indie creative trying to play with the big boys while holding onto the spirit of innovation

"Absolutely nothing has been going according to plan," sighs Phil Fish of Polytron Corporation.

"One day I will write a book, and you won't believe the bullshit we had to go through."



Despite its serene colours and whimsical style, *Fez* is a game with a troubled history, its trail-blazing stylistic outlook and inventive technical approach coming at the cost of time, money and the sanity of its two-man team. Even from the very start, when Phil Fish and then-creative partner Shawn McGrath sat down to discuss concepts, *Fez*'s offbeat dynamic began to cause conflict.

"Originally, me and Shawn were working on this other game," Fish explains. "Shawn had this idea for an abstract puzzler that used a similar 'four sides' mechanic, but I wanted to make a more traditional platformer using that twist. We had a falling out, and that project died."

Shawn McGrath went on to form his own company, the trickily named II (Right Square Bracket, Left Square Bracket), where he's primarily worked on *Dyad*, a fast-paced, puzzle-based racing shooter, recently made playable in a bizarre DIY cabinet form (see Home Improvement).

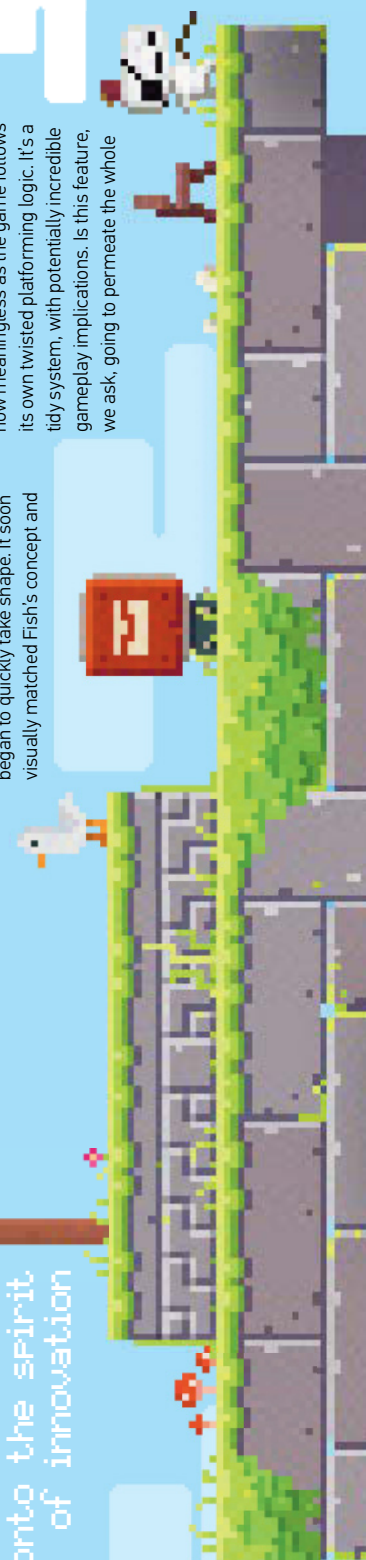
Fish was left all alone to ruminate on the future of an idea that he now had to believe in firmly to carry forward. Having split a partnership, he also had to find a new associate to work on it with.

"I came up with the idea for the 'squares = cubes' aesthetic, and I got really attached to it," says Fish. "I posted a note on deviantART saying I needed a programmer to make this game happen; Renaud Bédard was the first guy to reply. The rest is history."

It was progress that seemed fortuitously simple to attain. Bédard, despite his lack of professional experience, proved incredibly adept at sharing Fish's vision, and *Fez* began to quickly take shape. It soon visually matched Fish's concept and

began taking on the unique aesthetic that has quietly amazed onlookers at the game's sporadic appearances at industry conferences throughout the ensuing years.

In *Fez*'s two-dimensional platform world, as well as controlling hero Gomez, the player also uses the power of his unique, titular hat to modify the environment's axis, which can be flipped left or right at will. It's perhaps a similar effect to *Super Paper Mario*'s approach of sardonically flipping a 2D world into 3D, though *Fez*'s intention isn't simply to mock the physical impossibility of viewing a flat world from the other side. Rather, it's concerned with integrating such bizarre physical feats more rigidly into gameplay. So, in *Fez*'s case, rotating the axis turns the world 90 degrees, but Gomez and its inhabitants continue to interact with it in 2D, the assumed depth of an environment now meaningless as the game follows its own twisted platforming logic. It's a tidy system, with potentially incredible gameplay implications. Is this feature, we ask, going to permeate the whole



experience and make *Fez* as original and unique as it looks?

"I fucking hope so!" exclaims Fish. "That's kind of the whole game. Everything about *Fez* evolved from this simple idea that squares are actually cubes. The mechanics, puzzle, art, lore and logic all derived from that idea. Everything grew into its own very organically like that. Everything that wasn't directly related to that idea ended up being cut, so it's not just a cool art style for the sake of a cool art style; it's meaningful."

"Technically, it's nothing mind-blowing. I like to say this game could have been made at any point in the last 15 years; it's just polygons made to look like pixels with a clever twist."

From a purely technological viewpoint, Fish may be correct about *Fez*'s outlook, but we detect an element of modesty here. The 'clever twist' is what, system specs aside, has made *Fez* an entirely new concern, and proved something of a programming feat for Bédard, who effectively had to develop a theoretically impossible skew on physics to be able to interpret the ideas in Fish's head.

The resulting Escher-like logic has been made possible by what Bédard dubs Trixel Technology, and is effectively a three-dimensional interpretation of the standard 2D pixel. This may ring a bell to those who remember the late-Nineties trend in voxel technology, as seen in Westwood's *Blade Runner* and *Command & Conquer: Tiberian*

Sun, but Bédard asserts the crucial difference on his blog.

"Up to now," he wrote in 2007. "I could've called them voxels and it wouldn't have made any difference... but when it comes to rendering, we want every 2D side of the trixel [the name given to the player-facing side of a full trixel] to look like believable pixel art, so it needs to be made of smaller cubes. Standard voxel triangulation is complicated because it wants to look as close to the initial (curved, organic) shape as possible... but we don't! We want that pixelated, 8-bit look."

It seems that *Fez* is one of those occasions where function is inextricably linked with form; they are one and the same.

As Fish says, *Fez*'s rotation dynamic is its gameplay, and if an entirely original set of tech was required in order to avoid compromise, it's something Polytron – and Fish's unabashedly adventurous and ambitious spirit – never shied away from. It's a world so unique, and developed in and of itself, that Fish is confident that it needs no enemies, bosses or even penalties for death in order to be enjoyed.

"I'm hoping I'll succeed at creating a world that people will want to spend





Home Improvement

Shawn McGrath's *Dyad* seems like a fusion of *Tempest*, *Rez* and being an octopus. Plunging down a tunnel, the player has to use the protagonist's tentacles to grip objects on the track, pulling forward and reaching the end as quickly as possible. Engaging enough on its own, *Dyad* becomes more interesting when McGrath's website is consulted. Here, you can watch his girlfriend strapped to a terrifying motion cabinet device constructed of scrap metal, plywood and bedsheets, playing *Dyad* in the manner, presumably, in which it was intended, like a cross between *Afterburner* and *Saw*. *Dyad* is slated for a PSN release in 2011.

time in regardless of incentives," he says. "It's a 'stop and smell the flowers' kind of game. Hopefully, exploring this 3D world in 2D will be intrinsically fun, and wanting to explore and discover more of that world will drive the player forward."

Fez's aesthetic, then, is of paramount importance, and a little-known key figure in ensuring *Fez* looked and felt as striking and original as its concept is Paul Robertson, best known, perhaps, for his work on movie/comic tie-in *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*.

"Paul created most (if not all) of the wildlife you see around the world," Fish explains. "He made those from scratch. I just told him to make some animals, and he did, so that's all him. And they bear his signature Robertson bounce. He also did a lot of Gomez's animation, but not all of it..."

In fact, *Fez* has had three different animators contributing various elements at various points in its development. "It all blends together for me at some point," says Fish. "I guess it's a testament to [Paul's] skill that you can't really tell it's him. His work gelled really well with the rest of the world. He's scary-good."



While nailing the aesthetic and conceptual gameplay overlap seemed, for the most part, a relatively painless process, working out exactly how the game would play was another matter. It was a decision that was turned over and over for a considerable length of time – longer, perhaps, than was first expected – and *Fez* underwent several iterations over an escalating development period that now spans four years. "It's true that *Fez* evolved very organically," Fish tells us. "We had this mechanic, this character, and this hat. We spent about two years playing with that, trying to figure out what worked, what didn't. What kinds of levels to build and how to build them. The idea of an open world probably derived from the fun I was

"Fez evolved very organically. We had this mechanic, this character, and this hat. We spent two years playing with it"

having exploring single levels. It was always about exploring 3D structures. We just extrapolated from that and made it about exploring a world instead. Today, *Fez* is very much a kind of *Metrodvania-lite*. It's about lots of little rooms connecting to lots of other little rooms. It's about secret passages and warp gates and cheat codes."

It became a truly ambitious leap in focus for a team that still comprised only two core members. And while such a long and unbridled experimental development procedure allowed Fish's expanding vision to blossom, each publicly displayed iteration of *Fez* growing more charming and mechanically diverse, Polytron had allowed itself finally to take its toll on the company coffers. "We'd completely run out of money, and the project was about to die," says Fish, "when Trapdoor came along."

The relatively unknown, Quebec-based developer/publisher recognised an opportunity, and swept in to rescue Polytron from a most uncertain future. Already having made a deal in early March 2011 to publish its upcoming action stealth title *Warp* through EA, Trapdoor had ready resources to spend on helping a stricken friend in need.

"They're helping us out however they can," says Fish. "Not just with money, but with business, planning, merch – you name it. It's great for me, because I get to just work on the game all day without having to worry about the business side of things. I wish we'd hooked up with them sooner, and saved me a lot of trouble."

Fez now seems, for the moment at least, safe. Officially signed with

Microsoft for an exclusive XBLA release, eschewing the often more lucrative avenue of Steam on PC, Fish remains adamant about Polytron's decision for the game's destination.

"Fez is a console game, not a PC game," he states, emphatically.

"It's made to be played with a controller, on a couch, on a Saturday morning. To me, that matters; that's part of the medium." I get so many comments shouting at me that I'm an idiot for not making a PC version. 'You'd make so much more money! Can't you see? *Meatboy* sold more on Steam!' Good for them. But this matters more to me than sales or revenue. It's a console game on a console. End of story."

As for why Polytron decided on Xbox Live specifically, Fish won't be drawn, directly. "It's what made the most sense when we signed with them," he says, before adding cryptically: "If we had to do everything again today, maybe we wouldn't go down the same route, but it still makes a lot of sense today."

An alternative route, however, would most certainly not have involved WiiWare. "I love Nintendo as a gamer, and loathe them as a developer," states Fish.

"WiiWare is beyond bad. Not just the weird timed demos, but the tiny file size limitation. How they won't pay you a single cent until you sell a certain amount of copies, like what is happening to Gaijin Games and *Lit Line* right now." He continues; "The horrible interface, the lack of

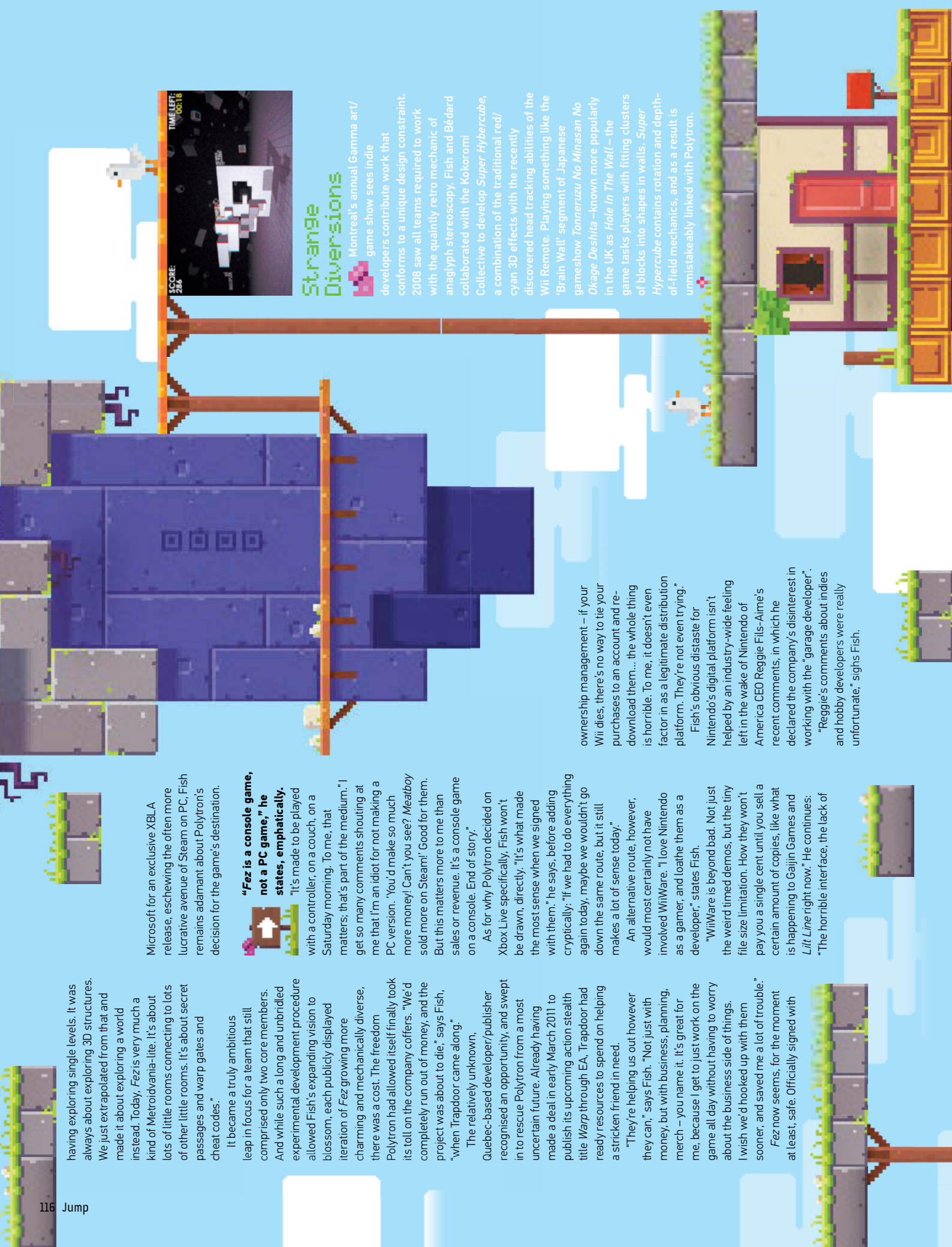
ownership management – if your Wii dies, there's no way to tie your purchases to an account and re-download them... the whole thing is horrible. To me, it doesn't even factor in as a legitimate distribution platform. They're not even trying."

Fish's obvious distaste for Nintendo's digital platform isn't helped by an industry-wide feeling left in the wake of Nintendo of America CEO Reggie Fils-Aimé's recent comments, in which he declared the company's disinterest in working with the "garage developer". "Reggie's comments about indies and hobby developers were really unfortunate," sighs Fish.

Strange Diversions

Montreal's annual Gamma art/game show sees indie developers contribute work that conforms to a unique design constraint. 2008 saw all teams required to work with the quaintly retro mechanic of anaglyph stereoscopy. Fish and Bédard collaborated with the Kokoromi

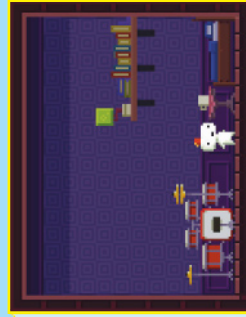
Collective to develop *Super Hypercube*, a combination of the traditional red/cyan 3D effects with the recently discovered head tracking abilities of the Wii Remote. Playing something like the 'Brain Wall' segment of Japanese gameshow *Tonneruzu No Mimasan No Okage Deshita* – known more popularly in the UK as *Hole In The Wall* – the game tasks players with fitting clusters of blocks into shapes in walls. *Super Hypercube* contains rotation and depth-of-field mechanics, and as a result is unmistakably linked with Polytron.



"Fez wouldn't work on 3DS. I don't know why people keep saying it would be great. The game is all 2D!"

"What Nintendo doesn't seem to realise is that indies and hobbyists aren't just indies and hobbyists; we're the next generation. Some of us won't always stay in the garage. Some of us will grow to become the next Will Wright, the next Miyamoto. And when we do," he adds, pointedly, "we'll remember. Nintendo is turning its back to an entire generation of developers. It's only going to hurt them in the long run."

It's a particular pity such an apparent rift is growing between Nintendo and Fish, because, with *Super Hypercube*, the intriguing side-project he worked on with Kokomori (see *Strange Diversions*), already under his belt, it feels like the 3DS in particular could prove a fruitful platform to pursue some even wider concepts in the field of perspective-based gaming. While Fish remains unsure as to exactly what they could be, he's at least firm for now on what would *not* work on the new handheld.



"Now that I've played with a 3DS, I can say that Hypercube would never work on it," Fish confirms.

Hypercube is all about moving your body and changing your point of view. The head tracking is a lot more important than the 3D. In fact, the head tracking kind of creates its own depth effect: the 3DS's 3D sweetspot is too small; you couldn't move your head or the DS without constantly losing the 3D signal."

"If I were to make a 3DS game, it would be something new," he continues. "*Fez* wouldn't work on 3DS either. I don't know why people keep saying it would be great. The game is all 2D! The gameplay is strictly 2D! There would literally never be anything jumping out at you. Even the rotation is isometric, so no perspective there." He summarises: "I'm having a lot of fun with my 3DS. I'm really into the augmented reality stuff. Probably I'd use that. Move is completely insignificant, but Kinect shows real potential."

When reflecting on his pioneering work with the likes of *Super Hypercube*, Fish begins to grow almost melancholy. "I actually really miss this experimental mentality," he says. "I hope I get to spend more time

experimenting with weird hardware and hacks in the future, the same way we did with *Super Hypercube*. *Fez* is a big commercial project; failure isn't really an option. But with more experimental work, failure is a huge part of it. It's something you can afford. It wouldn't have mattered if *SHC* didn't work at all – at least we would have tried. But I don't feel like I have that freedom with something like *Fez*. I want to go back to making smaller, weirder things."


It's a poignant way to end, but it's been obvious throughout that Fish is a man constantly shouldering the difficult transition between being one of Filis-Aime's 'garage hobbyists' to becoming a traditional game developer. Perhaps *Fez* has taken as long as it has to emerge in part due to its designer's reluctance to focus entirely on it, occasionally throwing himself back into his experimental shades of corporate responsibility gradually infringing on his creative flow. Still, with a publisher secured and the end in sight, *Fez* is now a vision, conceptually and commercially skewed as it has been, which is finally complete.

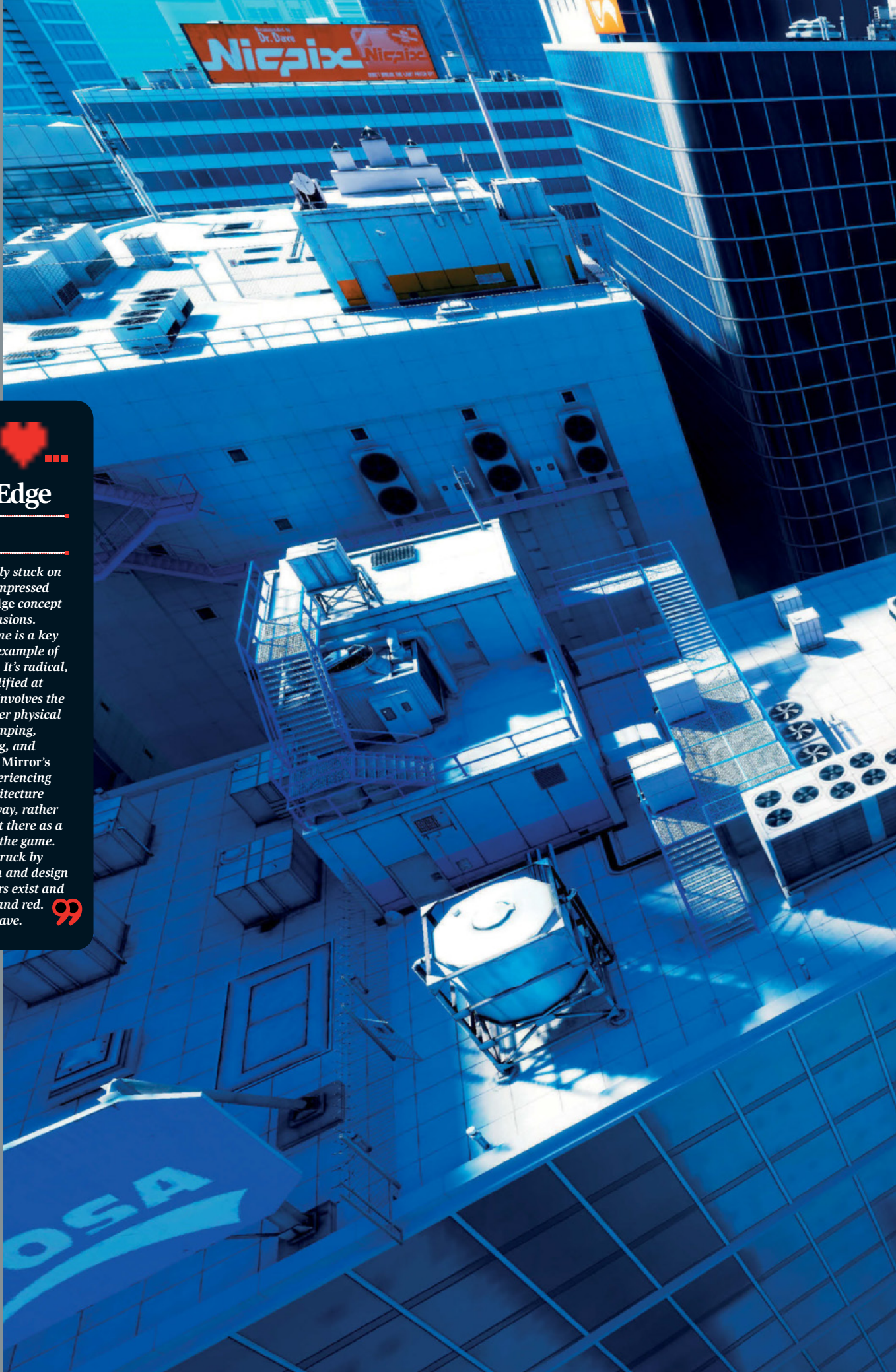


WHY I  

Mirror's Edge

VIKTOR ANTONOV,
ARKANE STUDIOS

66 *I'm still really stuck on and really impressed by the Mirror's Edge concept by EA's Digital Illusions. Mirror's Edge to me is a key reference and an example of good, pure design. It's radical, and yet very simplified at the same time. It involves the exploration of sheer physical sensations like jumping, running and flying, and what I like is that Mirror's Edge is about experiencing a city and its architecture in a meaningful way, rather than just having it there as a mere backdrop to the game. I'm particularly struck by having this fiction and design in which no colours exist and there's just white and red. It's just all very brave.* 





“Mirror’s Edge is about experiencing a city and its architecture in a meaningful way, rather than just having it there as a mere backdrop”

VIKTOR ANTONOV, ARKANE STUDIOS



★ 120

